



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



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Source: *Social Problems*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (November 2005), pp. 525-528

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of the [Society for the Study of Social Problems](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sp.2005.52.4.525>

Accessed: 25-12-2015 18:38 UTC

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Introduction: Narrative Environments and Social Problems

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Stories were once viewed as distinct narratives that could both describe and persuade. The publication of Vladimir Propp's book *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968 [1928]) changed that. Propp argued that the fairytale had a narrative form common to all storytelling. Actions and characters functioned in limited ways; for example, a witch or a dragon provides the evil force in tales of struggle and victory. Propp suggested that stories had a particular organization and could be analyzed accordingly. This began a tradition of scholarship on the structures and functions of stories, one that eventually piqued the interest of social researchers. From psychologist Jerome Bruner's (1986) discussion of the narrative construction of mind, to sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman's (1990) analysis of the gender mediations of divorce talk, and to anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod's (1993) narrative account of Bedouin culture, inner lives and social worlds are being subjected to narrative analysis across the disciplines.

Storytellers and Their Worlds

Much of this analysis has centered on the internal organization of stories. Less attention has been paid to their production, distribution, and circulation in society. Such concerns require that one step outside of narrative material itself and consider questions such as who produces particular kinds of stories, what interests publicize them, how do they gain popularity, where are they likely to be encountered, what are the consequences, and how are they challenged? Such questions take us to storytellers and their worlds, to the narrative environments in which stories are presented, to where extended accounts are more or less successfully constructed and communicated.

A narrative ethnographer by trade, I have been in the habit of both listening to and picking up on possible stories in various social settings. Over the course of systematically observing storytellers, attending to the use and reception of accounts, and collecting narrative material, I have found that the internal organization of stories, while important to understand in its own right, does not tell us very much about the relation of stories to the worlds in which they circulate. While the themes of a set of stories—such as the recovered accounts of sexual abuse or the narratives of childhood sexuality that appear in this section—might be identified and documented, discerning how these relate to particular social contexts requires an understanding of what those concerned “do with words.” The same story might be appreciated in one setting or at one time and place, but disparaged or ignored in others. The social consequences of narratives are poorly understood without careful consideration of what is at stake in the everyday contexts of storytelling.

Research reported in *Caretakers* (Buckholt and Gubrium 1979), a study of the local con-

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Social Problems, Vol. 52, Issue 4, pp. 525–528, ISSN 0037-7791, electronic ISSN 1533-8533.

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struction of children's emotional disturbance in residential treatment, is instructive. Through systematic participant observation, we were able to show that narratives of the children's inner lives, while available and occasionally communicated, were marginalized in the facility's highly behaviorized environment, even while there were occasions when such narratives and themes of interiority were deeply appreciated. A token economy and behavior modification programming valorized narratives of visible behaviors and "consequences." Still, the occasional consultation of a child psychiatrist rather than a behavioral psychologist provided communicative space for counter-narratives, encouraging staff members and treatment teams not to "stay out of the children's minds." On such occasions, encouraged by the consultant's deep psychiatric gaze, narratives thematizing early childhood disturbances, deep feelings, and hidden motives were taken to be more consequential for treatment decisions than were behaviorized accounts of children's activities. This complex narrative environment sometimes elicited accounts at odds with official therapeutic commitments. Thus, particular communicative spaces gave voice to what were not necessarily institutionally privileged narratives.

The value of these contrasting accounts and themes was not lost on the staff, as they periodically found it helpful to account for children's conduct and progress in treatment, especially to one another, in deep psychological terms. This was not conveyed to funding sources; those accounts reflected instead the facility's official treatment philosophy. Audiences, in other words, were important ingredients in the production, distribution, and circulation of stories. Questions of "how to put it" and what themes to highlight for particular purposes were noteworthy in the everyday formulation of stories about children.

Affirming Environments

Social settings vary as narrative environments. Some, such as the ones I have studied, I have viewed in terms of what Everett Hughes (1984) calls "going concerns." This is his way of emphasizing the work of maintaining particular ways of framing and doing matters of relevance to participants. Such concerns vary in size from families, friendship, support, and recovery groups, to schools, nursing homes, and therapeutic enterprises. An ongoing concern such as recovered memory therapy, for example, is an organized activity one of whose goals is to recollect the lost or otherwise hidden memories of the adult survivors of sexual abuse. As Joseph E. Davis notes in his article in this section, memory enhancement and retrieval techniques are applied so that survivors who remember are figured to recall stories of childhood sexual contacts. Patients are encouraged to relive these experiences narratively, and eventually to emplot them in relation to current psychological difficulties. Sexuality education programs such as Teach Abstinence Until Marriage deploy other stories, which are racialized when applied to Euro-American, as opposed to African American, children. As Jessica Fields explains in her article in this section, the emplotment of sexual misbehavior among Euro-Americans typically relates to the theme of childhood innocence, while parallel stories for African American youth rest on the theme of innate sexuality. The meanings of the internal elaboration and themes of any particular account cannot be separated from narrative practice (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

Each of these environments affirms certain stories; they are going concerns that narratively construct, reproduce, and privilege particular kinds of accounts for institutional purposes. Conversely, one would expect counter-narratives to be marginalized, "repaired," or otherwise challenged, if not kept in tolerable spaces. Across therapeutic concerns especially, the widely-applied and well-recognized rhetoric of denial can be highly effective in both suppressing unacceptable stories and affirming the articulation of acceptable stories. Because the affirmed stories of going concerns are often larded with globalized narratives such as therapeutic—as opposed to fatalistic or cosmic—discourses, the layered interplay between the

local, the national, and the international becomes a confluence of both narrative reproduction and narrative elaboration.

New Environments

Some narrative environments are ridden with challenges to existing stories. Indeed, to theorize environments as either narratively reproductive or narratively challenging short-changes the profound empirical linkages that exist between institutional practices on the one hand and social movements on the other. It is pity that so much theory-building on these fronts is compartmentalized and specialized when many of the issues, such as the construction of subjectivity, parallel one another. For example, the narrative reproduction of selves and personal identity in institutional context is mediated by official and unofficial framings (see Gubrium and Holstein 2001), just as the newly produced and contested identities touted by social movements are publicized through rhetorics of preferred and disparaged frames of understanding (see Snow 2003). If Hughes applied the term “going concerns” to institutions, the application can be extended to the going concerns of efforts toward change.

The empirical linkages between the affirmed and the new can be amazingly transformative. My research in the 1980s on the Alzheimer’s disease movement, for example, shows that marked differences in both local and global understandings of senile dementia formed in less than five years (Gubrium 1986). The (re)discovery of Alzheimer’s disease in 1979–1980 quickly became a medical and experiential story affirming both a new subject with a diseased, as opposed to a naturally aging, brain and the research activities of a soon-to-be-hugely-successful medical and psychological enterprise. The Alzheimer’s disease movement transformed, virtually overnight, the way professionals, families, the senile, and significant others narrated their relation to the aging brain and its associated cognitive functions. As the senile became victims of a disease, the aging enterprise—from the new National Institute of Aging to local caregivers—went into high gear to construct the associated social problems that became issues of national and international importance. It became evident that what was new and what was being affirmed were interwoven.

The application of these ideas to social problems is full of possibilities. Social problems are not straightforwardly obvious in society. They must be identified, and those concerned with them must be persuaded that they are timely and urgent if anything is to be done about them. The process of identification and rhetorics of persuasion take place in communicative context—in narrative environments whose accounts and resources variously serve to affirm or challenge both old and new stories about social conditions. Such environments reflexively shape the realization of the problems in question, and mediate their sustenance or transformation.

While I have separated my comments on affirming environments from those on new narrative environments, I should emphasize that stories and storytelling unfold in communicative practice. Practice is anything but neatly and empirically compartmentalized into institutional and social movement concerns. Practice turns our attention, in the case of narrative, to the activities and conventions of storytelling as they play out in the *heres* and *nows* of everyday life. These are sites of both affirmation and challenge from the start, where narrative clarification always already calls out old, new, and potential stories of our inner lives and social worlds.

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