Introduction

What Is the Story?

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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). 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. 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. 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.
A third criminological concept that informs narrative criminology is identity. Among criminologists labeling theorists have given the most sustained attention to identities, investigating their impact on criminal behavior. As a notion that individuals construct about who they are and how they see themselves by making meaning of available resources (i.e., social roles and personal attributes), identity shares common conceptual ground with self-narratives. However, identities as traditionally conceived are not narratives. Rather, labeling theorists have represented deviant identities as marks or stigmata, or, more realistically, as a criminal record. A label, not a story, is imposed, and the consequences of that label form the basis for one’s identity. Indeed, part of the actor’s problem with labeling is that others deny her or his stories altogether, constructing the individual instead as one-dimensional—as only the label (Garfinkel 1956). Whereas the labeling perspective brackets the authenticity of who people are and what crime is, the fact of labeling is taken to be real. Labeling theorists have not emphasized a story (or even a perception) of having been labeled.

Finally, many criminological theories deem important, if not primary, the would-be offender’s interpretations of (1) situations antecedent to the crime and (2) the situation for the crime. Strain theories consider how actors interpret their life circumstances—as, for example, thwarting goals or not; learning theories look at how actors interpret the outcomes of their conduct—as favorable (and thus reinforcing) or unfavorable (and thus punishing); rational choice theories are concerned with the actor’s perception of the benefits and costs of the criminal act; structured action theory attends to the actor’s performance of the “appropriate” gender, which may entail criminal action depending on the resources the actor deems available in particular settings and situational threats to gender performance.

Interpretations differ from narratives in important ways. First, as was also true of neutralizations, interpretations are principally about an event or situation, whereas narratives are more comprehensive. Second, situational interpretations may avoid referencing the self, whereas narratives are fundamentally concerned with the self. Finally, interpretations need not be communicated to have the criminogenic effect. In contrast, narratives are essentially verbalizations. The ways in which we assemble and verbalize our stories are paramount to narrative criminology.
Broader Theoretical Context

The main sources of guidance for narrative criminology are theoretical traditions that, for the most part, lie beyond the discipline. Constructionist approaches all, they include narrative psychology, ethnomethodology, cultural structuralism, and postmodernism in its various forms. As demonstrated below, these approaches differ along lines of agency and structure, and unity and fragmentation, which are all important aspects of narratives. We are also inspired by criminologies influenced by postmodern thought—constitutive criminology and cultural criminology.

Narrative Psychology: The Study of a Unified Self-Narrative

Narratives may be seen as the creative and artful construction of coherence and consistency. Such is the approach generally taken by narrative psychologists (e.g., László 2008; Crossley 2000; McAdams 1993; Polkinghorne 1988). Dan P. McAdams (1993, 11–12) emphasizes that “each of us constructs, consciously and unconsciously, a personal myth” which makes every individual unique. In his groundbreaking book Making Good, Shadd Maruna (2001, 85) argues that to desist from crime, ex-offenders must create a coherent prosocial identity in story form. Thus he writes: “If such an enormous life transformation is to be believed, the person needs a coherent narrative to explain and justify this turnaround.”

Borne of psychology, it is not surprising that agency and coherence are featured in these approaches. Psychological inquiry begins and ends with individuals and the field largely accepts individuals’ needs to see themselves as unified, to eliminate contradiction and thus to reduce cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). Consider that the formation of multiple self-identities is a diagnosis of mental disorder. Similarly, agency is central, at least in part, because the tradition emerges from clinical settings. This raises the question of whether coherence and agency are not so much in the nature of self-narratives as they are the goals of psychological therapies that reconstruct them. In any case, the approach from narrative psychology reminds us that agency is an undeniable fact of social life. Yet, the narrative coherence and consistency that contemporary storytellers pursue may be treated as historical phenomenon rather than intransigent fact.
Ethnomethodology: Narration as Self-Presentation

Because sociologists study cultural and social structures, their narrative analyses tend to depict greater cultural and societal determinacy than do those of psychologists. However, human agency and creativity are still important, at least in the American sociological tradition. Erving Goffman (1959), for example, describes actors’ near-constant shifts between different roles as they forge presentations of self. Likewise concerned with shifts, though not with assumed roles, ethnomethodologists (e.g., Garfinkel 1967) and conversation analysts (e.g., Sachs 1995) understand talk as involving constant and strategic moves between different, sometimes competing, narratives. Like narrative psychologists, ethnomethodologists are concerned with agency—in this case the active accomplishment of selves (among other things) through symbolic gestures—but they do not search for altogether unified self-narratives. Rather, narratives like other speech acts are local productions; they can only be understood in particular social settings: “they are features of the very scenes which they describe” (Wieder 1977, 4).

D. Lawrence Wieder’s (1974) book *Language and Social Reality* is the most important ethnomethodological contribution to criminology thus far. Wieder describes halfway house residents’ articulations of the so-called convict code during interviews as a continuous constitutive activity, and the code as a device in conversation. According to Wieder (1974, 175) the narrative is “more a method of moral persuasion and justification than it is a substantive account of an organized way of life.” Such artful creativity and the importance of storytelling context are both important insights for narrative criminology.

Cultural Structuralism: The Prewritten Narrative

A narrative is essentially a structure and narrative analysis is a search for that structure in the cultural structural traditions that have emerged in continental Europe. Michael Roemer (1997) argues that every story is over before it begins because we know how it will end. In other words, if characters were altogether free there would be no story. Other approaches similarly emphasize that self-narratives are determined by the social context and probe the structure of the narrative itself. These
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draw inspiration from Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1974) linguistic structuralism, according to which language is a relatively closed and determinist system, and the early writings of Foucault (1970), which described overarching cultural structures as shaping every aspect of society.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) recounts the history of the penal system as one in which the target of punishment went from the body to the soul, discourses closely connected to institutions became a means of disciplining subjects, and self-narratives were targeted for intervention. Such interventions are launched in the first instance by a full confession to the psychologist, doctor, or rehabilitation officer; these agents police the “right” narrative (see Fox 1999). Whereas Foucauldian studies of narrative scrutinize language use, the emphasis is on structural constraint and domination rather than human agency. Moreover, the emphasis is on the role of narrative for the larger system of meaning, or discourse, and not the particular narrative text. The important insight for narrative criminology is that narratives are part of larger meaning-making structures and that these are embedded in social institutions.

**Postmodernism: Narrative as Multidimensional Space**

Postmodernism has been one of the most important trends in the human sciences of the last three decades. Postmodernism, while oriented toward the structural level of meaning, emphasizes diversity and fragmentation. Jean-François Lyotard (1984), for example, famously described meta-narratives as increasingly supplanted by an array of “language games” (Wittgenstein 1972), where “questions, requests, assertions and narratives are launched pell-mell into battle” (Lyotard 1984, 17). From a postmodern perspective, a narrative can be described as a multidimensional space where different genres, discourses, and vocabularies merge and clash.

Postmodern thinkers view narratives as drawing on diverse cultural repertoires, representations, and discourses that originate in diverse social contexts. Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995), one of the founders of critical discourse analysis, describes these multiple origins as the interdiscursivity of texts. Derived from Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of intertextuality, this concept describes the process by which a speaker or a text draws on multiple discourses to construct meaning. In this regard Norman Fairclough (1992, 101–102) observes that “texts and utterances
are shaped by prior texts that they are ‘responding’ to, and by subsequent texts that they ‘anticipate’” and notes that “utterances . . . are inherently intertextual.” Postmodernists see intertextuality and complexity where others see uniformity; thus they endorse multiple interpretations of any one narrative. As Jacques Derrida (1988) points out, when the context of some discourse changes, its meaning also changes. A narrative is never the same from one appearance to another. No essential story is ever told. This hybridity, or fragmentation, can be considered a problem for narrative analysis. It can, for example, be argued that a hybrid or fragmented narrative is a failed narrative. However, these characteristics can be resources. The space left open for interpretation may make a story more effective upon reception (Polletta 2006). Speakers may also take advantage of that quality to achieve goals of, say, acceptance, as an ambiguous narrative is harder to prove wrong. Certainly the hybridity of narratives is more in line with depictions of human agency, of both narrator and interpreter, than is either the determinist language system of structuralism (Saussure 1974) or Labov’s (1972) components of the classic narrative.

These four theoretical traditions bring important insights to bear on narrative criminology. Narrative psychology reminds us that a speaker is an agent who seeks coherence, ethnomethodology that speakers use narratives as devices in particular social contexts, cultural structuralism that narration is essentially reproductive, and postmodernism that narratives are often fragmented and hybrid. Where others might see incompatibility, we arrive at the unifying idea that narrative criminologists should understand self-narratives dialectically—as agency conditioned by context (see Bourdieu 1990; Giddens 1984)—and as attempts at coherence that draw on a wide variety of cultural narratives and discourses.

Related Criminological Traditions

With the foregoing lessons in mind, we believe that narrative criminology can add something to the two established criminological traditions closest to our project: constitutive criminology and cultural criminology. Both observe that mainstream, positivistic criminology has neglected the cultural significance and signification of what is called crime. Both thus promise a provocative engagement with the narrative criminological project of explaining harm.
Constitutive Criminology

In part because they question postmodernists’ radical break from modernism and order, Stuart Henry and Dragan Milovanovic (1996, 6) call their constitutive criminology postpostmodern. They state that constitutive criminology “directs our attention to the way law, crime and criminal justice are conceptualized and implied as though they are objective realities having real consequences, consequences that we attribute to their claim, but that they do not possess in any intrinsic sense” (96). Because crime is no essential thing, it cannot be said to have causes: “crime is not so much caused as discursively constructed through human processes of which it is one” (170). Elsewhere Henry and Milovanovic do codify crime and therewith a (proximate) cause: crime is “the harm resulting from any attempt to reduce or suppress another’s position or potential standing through the use of power that limits the other’s ability to make a difference” (13; see also 116).

Constitutive criminology shares common ground with narrative criminology, given their joint emphasis on the discursive aspect of action. Henry and Milovanovic’s insights on the dialectics of crime and discourse chart a promising path for a nascent narrative criminology: whereas we have emphasized its primary task as discerning harm-promoting narratives, we might discern harm’s effects on narratives. Narrative criminologists sensitive to narrative fluidity should endorse the constitutive criminologists’ belief in the human capacity for change. However, in its explicit concern to distinguish causes of crime, narrative criminology stands within the realist tradition of the discipline, which constitutive criminology unequivocally rejects. A compromise might come from the notion that narrativists stand to recognize the fluid and therefore provisional nature of story causes—that is, researchers may treat stories as static for the sake of researching them, but that is not their essential nature.

Cultural Criminology

Cultural criminology, also borne of postmodern thought, has stimulated far more research than constitutive criminology has, which is not surprising given that its mandate is more of an empirical one (see
Ferrell and Hamm 1998; Katz 1988; Presdee 2000). Cultural criminologists specialize in describing particular criminalized or transgressive activities, but with a larger cultural context in view (Ferrell 2007). Jeff Ferrell (1999, 396) calls cultural criminology “an emergent array of perspectives linked by sensitivities to image, meaning, and representation in the study of crime and crime control.” A unifying concept is image, with images of crime—especially those disseminated in the mass media—seen as reciprocally shaping offenders’ experiences. Hayward and Young (2004, 259) thus state that cultural criminology “attempts to make sense of a world in which the street scripts the screen and the screen scripts the street.”

Narrative criminology’s explicit emphasis on discourse and its methodological commitment to studying discourse seem to differentiate it from cultural criminology. Consider that Lyng (2004, 360) positions cultural criminology against mainstream criminology’s emphasis on “the mind, discursive practices and rationality.” And yet, Jack Katz (1988, 302), forefather of cultural criminology, saw the violent offender as playing out a moral tale of one sort or another, mindful of “the narrative possibilities” of violent action. Katz’s brand of narrative criminology advances the action as helping the individual to realize the story. The notion that doing speaks is an inversion of the discourse analytic axiom that speaking does or performs (Austin 1962). It is not incompatible with a narrative criminological project, as long as doing is not privileged over speaking. Clearly, narrative criminology shares an affinity with cultural criminology’s view of “crime and the agencies of control as cultural products” (Hayward and Young 2004, 259). Finally, cultural criminology’s insistence on the seductions of crime is something narrativists can get behind, by understanding those seductions as mediated by language.

Doing Narrative Criminology

To do narrative criminology is to study “narrative reality,” to use Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009) expression, by mapping narratives or elements thereof onto patterns of crime. Narrative criminologists can relate narrative forms (e.g., tragedy, comedy) to criminal behavior. They can consider how linguistic moves within self-stories, such as passive versus agentive structures, function to assert license to harm or conversely
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to deny responsibility for harm. They can study the role of metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), nominalization (Fairclough 1992), nodal points (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), symbolic boundary drawing (Lamont and Molnár 2002), and floating signifiers (Levi-Strauss 1987) in constructing the excusable harm and the blameworthy victim.

As our review suggests, narrative criminologists may choose to emphasize either narrative creativity or narrative conditioning, unity or fragmentation, depending on their theoretical interests and the available or potential data. Regardless, careful research designs and methodologies are crucial. The questions and prompts one poses, for example, will depend upon whether one is searching for common life stories, story elements of members of a group, or the multiple stories that individuals tell.

Beyond these early choices as to research emphasis, the work of narrative criminology will not be straightforward, practically or politically. Researchers working with transcripts of interviews know that a narrative can be hard to distinguish. Narrative is generally coproduced by the research participant and the researcher, if not during the interview then certainly in the process of analyzing data later. Oftentimes a narrator only hints at a narrative, and the listener—the researcher or someone else—grasps a fuller narrative and its meaning. Narrative is seldom there in the classic (e.g., Labovian) form. Analysts can and do use intimations of narrative as texts, perhaps investigating how the narrative was produced collaboratively (e.g., Presser 2004). In this regard, reflexivity and the analyst’s disclosure of what she or he calls the narrative and why are crucial. That is to say, one should tell the story of the research.

For researchers accustomed to digging beneath words to locate their “true” meaning, the experience of privileging the story may feel strange. The researcher should forge ahead, even if the story sounds put on, canned, like a press release (Wiersma 1988). As we have argued, for narrative criminology, the fictive character of offenders’ narratives poses no problem. The story may be developed and told for strategic purposes, or the storyteller may truly believe it; the narrative criminological proposition is that either way, the story is consequential for teller and others. But do we go too far in our focus on the fictive? Do we pay too little attention to the so-called real world? We think not.

Narrative criminologists do take tangible oppressive structures into consideration. We perceive them as important in their own right and
as conditioning discursive processes (Sandberg and Pedersen 2009), but we also see them as discursively constructed and aim to study the ways in which they are plotted and given meaning in different social contexts. That is, we investigate hegemonic stories and limitations on creative storytelling due to social context, class, race, gender, and so on. We also recognize that the narratives of oppressed persons can subvert hegemonic understandings of the world (see Ewick and Silbey 1995; Polletta 2006).

A Collective First Step toward Narrative Criminology

In this book fifteen prominent scholars share their work in narrative criminology. They examine the narratives of offenders collected through qualitative interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, or written sources, or write theoretically about research that does so. They scrutinize the structure and meaning of offenders’ narratives including plots, metaphors, symbolic boundary drawing, and identities. They also consider how offenders’ narratives are linked to and emerge from the narratives and culture of mainstream society or particular subcultures or subso- cieties. In each of these works narratives are ways of constructing (or deconstructing) criminal behavior, actually or symbolically. Each of the chapters reveals important insights and elements for the development of a framework of narrative criminology. The result is a collective first step toward establishing the field of narrative criminology.

We hope the book inspires reflection and further research on the role of stories in criminal or harmful behavior. Part I of the book examines stories that construct proper selves. Based on fieldwork in prison, the first two chapters illuminate the moral identities that prisoners strive to achieve narratively. Thomas Ugelvik (chapter 1) examines the stories that male prisoners in Norway tell about violence toward and social marginalization of rapists which allow them to forge righteous selves. Jennifer Fleetwood (chapter 2) looks at female prisoners in Ecuador who see themselves as noncriminal story protagonists caught up in smuggling operations. Jody Miller, Kristin Carbone-Lopez, and Mikh Gunderman (chapter 3) show that imprisoned women draw from gendered narratives to make sense of their shifting involvement with methamphetamine. And Janice Victor and James Waldram (chapter 4) investigate
the storied stigma management efforts of men who were released from prison after their participation in sexual offender treatment programs.

Part II relates how stories animate and mobilize or curb harmdoing. Robert Keeton (chapter 5) reveals the impact that religious narratives had in inspiring Indian removal policies and related atrocities in nineteenth-century America. Sveinung Sandberg and Sébastien Tuttenges (chapter 6) discuss the similarities between contemporary stories of addiction and bad trips, and ancient folktales and myths, arguing that even tragic drug stories can motivate drug use. Patricia O’Connor (chapter 7) clarifies the discursive devices that drug users and maximum security prisoners use to change their storylines and their lives.

Part III highlights narrative creativity and reflexivity. Fiona Brookman (chapter 8) advances a view of narratives as ever changing and inherently ambiguous, and discusses the theoretical implications of such narrative incoherence. Kester Aspden and Keith Hayward (chapter 9) assess the relationship between cultural and narrative criminology, and offer autoethnographic insight into the reflexive nature of storytelling. Carlo Tognato (chapter 10) illuminates cultural shifts in the shared story of tax evaders in Italian culture and argues that convincing performances of that story are crucial to public acceptance. Finally, to conclude our story of a transformative dialogue of ideas for a transformative criminology, we summarize the insights from each of our contributors and discuss the way forward for narrative criminology.

NOTES
1. Here and throughout the book we use the terms narrative and story interchangeably, although an alternative view posits the former as more all-encompassing and the latter as more episode-oriented (see Presser 2008).
2. Foucault treats discourse differently than do most linguists, for whom it simply means spoken or written language use (see, e.g., Fairclough 1995).
3. More generally Fairclough (1992, 41–42) describes the distinction between “referential” and “constitutive” views of the relationship between language and reality.
4. One exception is Lonnie Athens’s theory of violence, where a self is evoked in making an interpretation. According to Athens (1997, 98–99), “the type of self-image that people hold is intimately connected to both the range and character of the situations that they will interpret as calling for violent action, underscoring that their self-images are congruent rather than incongruent with their interpretations.” As such, identities constrain how one defines a situation
among myriad possibilities. Another exception is Messerschmidt’s (1993, 1997) structured action theory, where the actor is primarily concerned with self-identification: the situations as the actor interprets them help her or him to enact identities.

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