

STORIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

How do the supposedly true stories we tell about the past influence our relationships in the present? What, in other words, is the rhetorical value of historical texts, written and oral? In this essay, I argue that more attention should be paid to how people socially create stories about 'what *really* happened back then', to suit their own political interests; and how, in the process of doing so, they partition the world into cognitive territories known as 'selves' and 'others'.

KEY WORDS • memory • rhetoric • symbolic interaction

Stories recounted about the past have power. (Appleby et al., 1994: 157)

Three of the most important assumptions in symbolic interactionist theory are: (1) humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; (2) these meanings are not inherent in the things themselves but arise through social interactions; and (3) during these interactions, meanings are not unproblematically applied, but are shaped and reshaped through an internal conversational process, with people striving hard to make sense of the things they encounter (Blumer, 1969: 2–5).

The kinds of 'meanings' on which symbolic interactionists generally have focused include attitudes (toward abortion, gun control, etc.); concepts of self ('Who am I?' tests, and the like); and accounts (e.g. men's excuses and justifications for why they beat their wives). Also important, but less researched, are the *purportedly non-fictional stories that people tell*.

What little has been done on the subject of story-telling points to the theoretical and methodological value of not accepting these stories as unadulterated reports, but of recognizing how they are partly mythical — narratives crafted by people to favorably situate themselves in the topography of social life. George Herbert Mead, considered to be the founder of symbolic interactionism, recognized this fact when he talked of how 'mythical pasts' manipulate social relationships (Maines et al., 1983). All stories, however, have an element of myth or fiction to them; and thus, all stories suggest some degree of manipulation.

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Two recent examples of story-oriented research are Orbuch et al.'s (1993) study of courtship; and Hopper's (1993) study of divorce. The Orbuch et al. study found different courtship stories to be related to marital happiness. White couples whose story lines did not incorporate early obstacles, like overcoming family opposition or getting over a previously failed relationship, tended, for example, to report higher levels of marital happiness. One explanation for this finding — one that accepts the couples' stories at their face value — is that the couples who had an easier time to begin with also had an easier time later on. Another explanation — one that acknowledges the symbolic and rhetorical aspect of the stories and that is equally, if not more, valid — is that the couples who were happier at the time of the interview crafted stories that made sense of their current good fortune.

In Hopper's study, it was found that the divorce stories told months after the divorce decision were tied less to events, intentions and feelings that had happened during the relationship itself, than they were to the identity of the person telling the story. Thus, if the story-teller happened to be the divorce initiator, the importance of self-fulfilment was advanced ('My needs weren't being met'), while if the story-teller was the non-initiating partner, the value of family and commitment was stressed ('I had been working my butt off trying to keep our relationship together'). The stories, according to Hopper, were not pure fabrications, but they were not completely true either. Rather, what initiators and non-initiators seemed to be doing was patching together narratives from actual prior events — selecting some (but not other) events, intentions and feelings to suit their own political interests. In the vernacular of symbolic interactionism, the two parties were reflexively and pragmatically crafting a history of their marriage; trying their best to put on a good face.

Stories as islands of meaning

While there are any number of ways to theorize about stories (both Orbuch et al., 1993 and Hopper, 1993 offer their own theoretical backdrops; see also Harvey et al., 1989; Linde, 1993; Sarbin, 1986), much can be gained by going back to the root themes of symbolic interactionism, and conceptualizing stories as meanings. If we do this, we immediately confront the question of why, in the first place, 'people act toward things in terms of the meanings that the things have for them'; and in our attempt to come up with an answer, we arrive at the proposition that the creation of meanings is essentially about 'making distinctions'.

The value of conceptualizing stories in these terms is two-fold. First, we then can subsume story-telling under the umbrella of symbolic interactionism, a theoretical framework with a long and venerable tradition; and second, we can recognize the role that story-telling plays in the human striving for social order. In *The Fine Line*, for example, Eviatar Zerubavel (1991: 1) notes that:

Distinctions . . . are the basis of any orderliness. Separating entities from their surroundings is what allows us to perceive them in the first place. In order to discern any 'thing,' we must distinguish that which we attend from that which we ignore. Such an inevitable link between differentiation and perception is most apparent in color-blindness tests or camouflage, whereby entities that are not clearly differentiated from their surroundings are practically invisible. (Zerubavel, 1991: 1)

As to what the creation of meaning entails. Zerubavel likens the process to

drawing property lines, whereby we produce ‘islands of meaning’ to conceptually divide one piece of land from the next (e.g. New York from New Jersey). Similarly, Zerubavel says, we form islands of meaning to divide our premarried lives from our married lives (assuming we make this transition), and to separate one role from the next (children vis-a-vis parents, husbands vis-a-vis wives, if we are talking about roles and counter roles). How we accomplish this cognitive geography basically comes down to a grouping strategy not unlike the strategy that researchers use to decide upon the cutting points for variables:

Creating islands of meaning entails two rather different mental processes — lumping and splitting. On the one hand, it involves grouping ‘similar’ items together in a single mental cluster — sculptors and filmmakers (‘artists’), murder and arson (‘felonies’), foxes and camels (‘animals’). At the same time, it also involves separating in our mind ‘different’ mental clusters from one another — artists from scientists, felonies from misdemeanors, animals from humans. . . . Separating one island of meaning from another entails the introduction of some mental void between them. (Zerubavel, 1991: 21)

Story-telling, in short, is how humans impose order on the universe.

The politics of self and other

It is axiomatic in symbolic interactionism, as well as in its variants, that all human communication is ultimately about interpersonal relationships. Putting it more concretely, whatever people say, and however they choose to say it (be it the simplest account, or the most elaborate and complicated story) ultimately implies the following assertions: ‘This is how I see myself . . . this is how I see you . . . this is how I see you seeing me . . .’ and so on (Watzlawick et al., 1967: 52). Stories and relationships thus are inextricably intertwined, not only in the sense that people exchange information through stories but also in the sense that *people come to define themselves and others through the stories they tell*. In other words, stories allow people to lump themselves with some individuals, and split themselves from others — to create islands of meanings generally known as ‘selves’ and ‘others’.

Once we begin to approach stories in this way, it is hard, if not impossible, to ignore the political functions of story-telling. Consider, for instance, the following. Recently, an article was published in *Parade Magazine* on the subject of fathers and sons (Keyes, 1993). Like so many other articles in this genre, much of the piece relied on what may be called ‘atrocious tales’ (see Best, 1990) — stories about fathers who neglected their children. ‘My father did not play a big role in our family life’, the author begins:

He worked hard, traveled at times and didn’t say much when home. Occasionally, Dad would pull out a flat old baseball glove and play catch with his four kids. Sometimes he’d take us to the drive-in. Once my two brothers and I took turns tickling him as he dozed on the sofa. Without opening his eyes, Dad tried to catch us with a swooping hand as we screamed and laughed and dashed out of reach. But that sort of memory is rare. Mostly, I don’t remember a whole lot about my father. I wish it were otherwise. So do many men. Over the last two decades, I’ve interviewed dozens of men about their dads and collected hundreds of pieces of writing by sons about fathers. I’ve discovered that many other men have felt the same difficulty communicating with their fathers. (Keyes, 1993: 4)

Read the last five sentences again — carefully. Note that the author essentially

is talking about what children *remember* about their fathers, accentuating the distance between one generation and the next. He thus *lumps* himself with some men (reflective sons), and *splits* himself from others (absentee fathers). The void he creates is essential to his concept of himself (good), and his concept of his father (bad).

Now, look at what he does next. He quickly shifts from the memory that he has of his father to a discussion of father–son communication, or lack thereof. That is, he accepts his and others' memories at their face value, and then goes on to explain why men have particular kinds of relationships with their fathers, ignoring why men have particular kinds of *memories* of relationships with their fathers.

This is a big leap. Why? Because memories of one's father are not simply recordings of the past (saved files on the 'hard disk' we call our brain); rather, they are stories that, like courtship and divorce narratives, are patched together to distinguish and privilege ourselves — to show that we are 'New York' and not 'New Jersey', so to speak. In essence, the author is telling us as much if not more about *his map of the world* than he is about his father's travels in that world.

Research implications

I have offered, as examples, stories about parenthood — and earlier, stories about courtship and divorce — but, of course, the symbolic or rhetorical significance of story-telling extends well beyond these domains. If the connections outlined here have any merit, researchers interested in social and personal relationships would do well to channel their energies to studying the following: how do people construct stories of their lives; of their days; of the previous hour, or minute? To what extent are stories solitary works of art; and to what extent are they, unbeknownst perhaps to their makers, collective enterprises (e.g. see Wegner et al., 1991)? (How do stories arise through *social* interactions?)

How do historical events impact on the stories that people tell? How, for example, did the Great Depression affect a generation of family stories (Martin et al., 1988)? How does the late 20th century gender revolution affect the stories being told about men and women?

What kind of internal conversational process do people engage in, as they fashion their stories; and how does this process relate to the presentation of self (see Goffman, 1959: 4–6)? Symbolic interactionists attach significance to the proposition that social life is largely improvisational. If this is true, then how does this improvisational element play itself out in the stories that people tell about their marriages, their childhoods ... their weekend visits with friends?

What are the relational factors in the here-and-now that influence stories about the past? If the stories we tell are linked to the social positions we occupy (e.g. divorce initiator), then there is a need for research on how stories are connected to, among other things, race, class, gender and sexual orientation. If the stories we tell are tied to the decisions we make (e.g. the decision to marry, or to have a child), then there also is a need for research on how stories influence whether people stay in, or leave, a relationship. Sociologist and priest Andrew M. Greeley says that Catholics stay in the Church because Catholicism has a library of great stories (Greeley, 1994). So, too, people may

stay in a marriage because of how much they love the marital stories on which their concept of themselves, and their future, is based.

Lest researchers think that they are excluded from the cognitive processes I have outlined, there is the important question of how the stories that scholars tell in their books and articles are related to *their* efforts to lump and split the universe. To what extent, it may be asked, do research narratives 'other-ize' subjects and respondents simply to further professional privilege (Fine, 1994)? To what extent do scholars stand not only on the shoulders of giants but also on the necks of the very people whose words and actions come to be defined as 'data'?

In conclusion, historians recognize that story-telling is a political process; that 'nations keep their shape by molding their citizens' understanding of the past, causing its members to forget those events that do not accord with its righteous image while keeping alive those that do' (Appleby et al., 1994: 154, drawing on Douglas, 1982). By the same token, relationships are shaped and controlled through the stories that people tell. Whoever in the group gets to play historian is the one who will probably dictate its course.

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