

# Narrative criminology for these times

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To those of you who ask, who are you? The answer: We are the soldiers of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ... who took it upon ourselves to bring back the glory of the Islamic Caliphate and turn back injustice and indignity (ISIS City Charter for Mosul, June 2014)<sup>1</sup>.

*Women forced to stay indoors. The hands of thieves amputated.* Soldiers and civilians summarily executed - shot, beheaded or crucified. The violent measures taken by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, variously abbreviated as IS, ISIL and ISIS, astound us with their dark, anachronistic brutality. If ever a contemporary offender seemed pure evil, unconnected to civilized society, IS is that offender. Yet, like everyone else, IS forges its identity and constructs the meaning of its actions through stories. The violence and other harm that IS perpetrates and threatens to perpetrate enact a story of tragedy and triumph. IS does what it does as heroic restorers of a lost time, albeit using new technology, including videos and messages on YouTube and social media. Their stories captivate marginalized and resentful male youth around the world who are in pursuit of their own meaningful autobiographies. Like young men before them, they leave their safe havens, risk their lives and commit atrocities thousands of miles away from home by the force of the collective story.

## A case for Narrative Criminology

Narrative criminologists are poised to clarify the appeal and the actions of IS, for narrative criminologists view stories as mainsprings of practices and patterns that harm. We live our lives according to autobiographies ever in draft form. We are moved to do the next thing to fulfil the current chapter, as it were, of our story. The story conforms to cultural models of lives like ours and particularly to the cultural models (aspired-to) reference groups make available. The individual is a creative auteur whose authorship is nonetheless deeply structured.

In arguing that stories shape action, narrative criminologists follow the well-worn path of psychologists, sociologists, historians, literary theorists, and others. And criminologists have long appreciated and used offenders' stories as data. However, they have hardly mined the potential of offenders' stories to explain crime and desistance from crime. Criminologists have tended to treat narrative as any statement made and/or disseminated by a social actor, including offenders, victims, and criminal justice agents (and agencies). Narrative is indeed a statement but of a particular sort. It is a rendering of experience that evaluates the experience, and thereby evaluates those who are connected to the experience, most of all ourselves.

In addition, criminologists have typically used narrative as a report on people's lives. The Chicago School social scientists quite famously took narratives to hold invaluable information on individual criminogenic factors such as parental neglect, peer influence and material privation. These factors were 'the main thing', whereas narrative was a very good way of finding out about them. When narrative is viewed simply as a report, the researcher's task is to reliably solicit the narrative and perhaps to ascertain that the story is 'true' by comparing it with other data sources. However, when we

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<sup>1</sup> see [www.counterextremism.com/content/isis-city-charter-mosul-june-2014-480](http://www.counterextremism.com/content/isis-city-charter-mosul-june-2014-480) [Accessed 3 December 2014]

consider the narrative itself as influential, as narrative criminologists do, we are not very concerned with its validity. Whether true or false, the narrative makes things happen. Rewriting the Thomas theorem, the content of stories surely might not conform to reality; still the stories are real in their consequences.

The power of narrative regardless of truth value is most vivid in the case of mass harm. Stories told by elites - called ideology or propaganda, particularly when observers deem those stories to be false - mobilize large numbers of people to support harmful action, either with direct participation, enthusiastic consent or relatively disengaged tolerance. The history of false tales mobilizing such action, much of it lawful, is long and horrific. Hence the outsized theoretical jurisdiction of narrative criminology: harm and not just crime, legal and not just illegal activity, mass harm and not just individual harm. People tell stories to influence others, but stories get their tellers going as well. Stories give transcendent, emotional energy to action. Furthermore, storytellers are held accountable for their stories. Support for some collective action lasts only as long as its founding mythology holds people in its sway; leaders are wise to settle affairs so as to keep the story believable.

In the same way as IS stories mobilize Western Muslims and new Western converts to Islam, the stories told by the mass media and politicians concerning IS shape responses. Following Phillip Smith (2005) we might argue that interpreting the conflict via an apocalyptic genre, emphasizing the absolute evil of the opponent and its grave global threat, increases the probability of militarized engagement. A conflict can be narrated using any of several genres (e.g. apocalyptic, tragic, romantic or low mimetic). Deciding to go to war is the outcome of a genre guess, the consequence of which is that nations spend billions fighting wars and soldiers and civilians risk their lives in the event. Can we make any stronger a case for the importance of narrative?

## **The future of work in Narrative Criminology**

It behoves us to ask what about any particular narrative makes it consequential. Both substance and form matter, therefore we attend to the thematic, linguistic and interactional mechanics of storytelling. Maruna (2001) and Smith (2005) have done this work, comparing storied statements of one's agency in Maruna's case, and story genres in Smith's case. Contributors to our forthcoming book, *Narrative Criminology: Understanding Stories of Crime* (2015), ask how story characteristics (e.g., metaphors), elements and plots inspire action, with cases ranging from atrocities committed against Native Americans in the 19th Century, tax evasion in modern-day Italy, and women's drug trafficking and use in Ecuador. Through qualitative interviews, ethnographic fieldwork and written archives, contributors revealed the cognitive, ideological, and institutional mechanisms by which narratives promote harmful action. They also consider how narratives are linked to and emerge from conventional society and specific subcultures. Each chapter reveals insights for the continued development of a framework of narrative criminology for understanding crime and criminal justice.

We believe the forthcoming book is an important first step towards increasing criminological interest in narratives as shapers of action. In particular, we hope it will inspire more empirical research on narratives and their role in producing harm. We welcome quantification, to better grasp distributions of narratives and narrative effects, and narrative analysis that take structures beyond the linguistic into account. Narrative resources are clearly not equitably distributed and not all stories can be told by everyone (Polletta, 2006). Social and economic exclusion is intertwined with one's narrative repertoire and with how a narrative from that repertoire is received. In future, narrative criminologists might also attend to some aspects of narratives heretofore downplayed.

First, most narratives contain or consist in fragments, ironic allusions, and play: they are given to a plurality of interpretations (Frank, 2010). Characters can be difficult to pin down as, say, good or bad. In fact, frequently several stories are told and character evaluations generated simultaneously. Studies of narratives in criminology should take this complexity into account and study the polyvocal

and dialogical character of narratives as well as contradictions, as vehicles for both innovation and as consequential for narrative diffusion and reception.

Second, cognitive cues or tropes can be studied as proxies of hidden or taken-for-granted stories, only hinted at in the telling, alluding to narratives that are presumed to be shared, which thus seem not to require recounting. Indeed, what we often recognize as narratives are in many cases mere fragments - cues directing the audience's attention in particular, familiar directions. In fact, gaps, silences, and contradictions may be especially instrumental in producing hegemonies; it might even be said that hegemony operates through gaps, silences, and contradictions. We recommend discovery of these cues-to-stories and reconstruction of the narratives they refer to, which holds promise for bridging narrative and political economy analyses.

Third, few scholars have studied the flow of narratives in social space, and thus the way criminogenic stories are actually composed, adopted, exaggerated, revised and/or rejected. The closest we get to these kinds of studies are ethnographies of criminal milieus, which seldom emphasize narrative *per se*. Rather, we must read a narrative approach into them in order to appreciate the influence of stories. Narrative criminologists should both do more ethnography and explore and analyse interviews as storytelling situations.

Future studies in narrative criminology could explore the foundations of harm that get laid through collaborative story production on blogs, message boards, YouTube and social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. The velocity and spectacle of storytelling online may intensify the call of the stories that are told. New harms, as well as social control of harms, taking place online and in social media challenge narrative scholars in their efforts to discern authorship, plot, and genre. Storytellers in electronically mediated contexts have limited control over and thus limited accountability for 'their' stories and the meanings and coherence of those stories. We suspect that, for these reasons, narrators in mediated environments are inclined to take even more liberties with interpretive ambiguity than in other historical periods and in other settings, and to hold less allegiance to consistency in stories of self.

## **Conclusion**

These times - characterized as they are by rapid-fire social and environmental change and consciousness thereof, brisk and impersonal virtual global exchanges in texts and images, identity fantasies and identity nightmares - demand cultural appraisals of crime and crime control. Cultural criminology reminds us of the importance of culture to crime, criminalization, deviance and harm, now as never before. We believe that detailed studies of narrative are crucial to understanding those relationships. Narratives are just one discursive form, but they are one of the most important forms, if not the most important, for transmitting values, norms and rationales for behaviour. They offer us models of how and when and against and with whom to act given those values, norms and rationales. Narrative criminology is concerned with aetiological inquiry but challenges positivist social science on account of the fluidity of our stories, broader discourses, and all other elements of what we call culture. Like all other stories, the stories of IS and the counter-narratives they bring forth are ever in flux, and thankfully so. These stories and many others suggest sites of intervention for the sake of a more pacific world.

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