

Police officers telling stories

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Narrative research has been around for a long time. Present-day studies can and do build on multiple foundations. For instance, in the 1960s and '70s socio-linguists and sociologists like William Labov and Harvey Sacks showed how stories take shape in every-day conversations. Psychologist Jerome Bruner and philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argued in the 1980s that storytelling is central to the way people make sense of their world. And, in the 1990s as well as the previous decade, narrative research flourished particularly in organization studies under the guidance of researchers like David Boje, Barbara Czarniawska and Yiannis Gabriel. In criminology, storytelling has also become a strong feature (see e.g. Presser and Sandberg, this issue; and forthcoming). Any criminologist doing qualitative fieldwork who has not heard of narrative research by now has to have made quite an effort to ignore it.

I came to study stories when I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork in local government, but did not start that investigation with the concept of storytelling in mind. I more or less stumbled on it, trying to understand the cultural dimensions of local government. Storytelling enabled me to observe culture in action and offered a useful lens to look at collective sense-making. It helped me to see how public problems are defined and solutions are offered.

Some years later, I got the chance to look at storytelling at a police office (van Hulst, 2013). The difference between studying storytelling in a town hall and storytelling in the police canteen is that in the latter we hardly have to ask ourselves what is going on. We all tend to turn our experiences into stories, but some of us just have more eventful lives. That's why police officers have so many stories to tell, and they typically start telling stories from the day they enter the academy and never stop doing it.

I prefer to use a basic and somewhat broad definition of stories. Stories are built from events and actors in a setting. If we started with a more restricted definition, we would risk ignoring an important part of the way humans make sense of what happened/is happening/happens. Starting with a broad definition also brings us to storytelling. A study of the telling enables us to understand much of what stories actually do as part of a more general social practice and how they contribute to that practice. Storytelling, for instance, does something different in the context of a police briefing than in the context of a lunch break in the canteen. In the briefing, for example, the facts of the matter are more important than the culture-coloured experience of the teller. At the same time, officers do not leave their cultural categories or perceptions at the door when they enter the briefing. So different social practices - with the roles, goals, materials, etc. of which they consist - do different things to the events, actors and settings that are represented in those stories.

Over the course of my research, I came to see that stories are told not just when the officers are giving an interview or spending time in the canteen, but also during the police briefing, when they are writing up their reports, and so on. Police officers are constantly making sense of the events that have happened (cf. Shearing and Ericson, 1991). Policing in large part equals dealing with events that somehow break with social norms and order, which makes these events worth telling about. Obviously, citizens call the cops even when it is hard to see what norm or order has been threatened. Just by calling the cops, a situation can turn into a problematic one, Egon Bittner would tell us. An officer I interviewed some years ago remembered such a situation. A mother had called the police because her son refused to go to bed. (The arrival of the officers did fix the problem, by the way.) Although police officers think this type of call is not real police work, you can be sure that they'll tell

their colleagues about such a call when they return to the station. They'll tell that story for the same reason that a lot of our stories are told: something happened that you would not expect: something that can be considered funny, shocking, annoying, etc.

The encounters between the police and citizens also lead to many and varied stories. Some of these encounters are physically or verbally violent and lead to traumas, lawsuits or worse. I am well aware that the stories that Dutch police officers live through are the dramas that some of their colleagues around the globe also have to deal with. And to be sure, officers have regularly 'magnified the danger in the tales they [tell] each other' (Westley, 1970: xiii). At the same time, storytelling about encounters can put rather mundane exchanges into focus; the kind of 'he said, and then I said, and then he said', etc. These exchanges often have the officer as the verbal victor, although the exchange might also focus on the hilarity of what a citizen said or did or a number of other interactional aspects. Inconspicuous as they might seem, it is through the constant flow of such stories that officers reproduce the meanings of self, others and work. Although we should not think that what gets said in the canteen is a faithful representation of what happens on the streets (Waddington, 1999), listening to stories told backstage helps us greatly to understand the world of police officers as they make sense of it.

The study of storytelling and narrative in criminology, as a collection of studies using a narrative approach would quickly show, gives voice to many tellers in many contexts. If 'my' officers find a set of events worth telling a story about, I don't doubt that those events would have high appeal elsewhere as well. And the roles of hero and villain would be distributed differently, depending on the cultures that form the storytelling context. The next step for me then (if I had the time and money) would be to study storytelling about the 'same' types of events in the different contexts that end up in our criminology journals. The ultimate storytelling study would include examining the storytelling performances of the full range of inhabitants of the social world who come into contact with and form part of that same chain: victims, offenders, police officers, lawyers, attorneys, probation officers - all of them.

References

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