

Why Study People's Stories? The Dialogical Ethics of Narrative Analysis

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Abstract:

Narrative analysis is presented as continuous with personal storytelling in the work of remoralizing what Weber identified as disenchanted modernity. Critics of contemporary storytelling seem to misunderstand what kind of authenticity of self is expressed in stories. Against those whom Charles Taylor calls "knockers" of the idea of personal authenticity, this article affirms authenticity, but in terms that are dialogical: authenticity is created in the process of storytelling, it is not a precondition of the telling, and authenticity remains in process. This authenticity is shown to have an affinity with democratic politics, in contrast to the neo-liberal affinity of the knocker position.

Keywords: *Narrative analysis, authenticity, research ethics, dialogue, disenchantment.*

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The stories people tell about their lives are one way they confront a dilemma clearly posed by Max Weber in “Science as a Vocation,” unexpectedly one of his last public lectures before his sudden death in 1920. At the core of Weber’s understanding of modernity is the idea of disenchantment. Our contemporary fate, Weber (1958) told his audience in 1919, is to live in times when “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play” (p. 139). Modernity has lost, or renounced, “recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savages, for whom such mysterious powers existed” (p. 139). What modernity has gained are the very real powers of technology and calculation. The core belief of modernity is “that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation” (p. 139). One current manifestation of this modernist belief is the recurring news coverage of the promises attending the discovery of the genetic code, which is presented as another step in the inexorable mastery of the human body by scientific calculation. Weber would, I think, be both fascinated by what science has discovered and bemused by the publicity hype that attends this discovery. He was no Luddite about the real benefits of technological mastery, but neither did he ignore what is lost in the disenchantment of the world.

Weber asked in 1919 whether modernity has lost access to “meanings that go beyond the purely practical and technical” (p. 139). He defers to Tolstoy, who puts the question in terms of death. On Weber’s reading, Tolstoy’s conclusion was that:

...for civilized man death has no meaning...because the individual life of civilized man, placed into an infinite ‘progress,’ according to its own imminent meaning should never come to an end; for there is always a further step ahead of one who stands in the march of progress. (Tolstoy, quoted by Weber, pp. 139-140)

The implication that Weber draws from Tolstoy is stark: “And because death is meaningless, civilized life as such is meaningless; by its very ‘progressiveness’ it gives death the imprint of meaninglessness” (p. 140).

Weber’s pessimism attempts to recognize, with the clearest possible vision, the conditions in which each person faces up to modernity. “What stand should one take?” is Weber’s great question. He is particularly interested in the stance of the scientist. Again he turns to Tolstoy to pose the dilemma, quoting Tolstoy’s prophetic words: “Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important to us, ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’” (p. 143). Weber concurs that science cannot answer this question, yet he still finds in science the best possibility for a vocation worthy of the times.

Weber’s imagination of any possible reenchantment of the world seems limited to some mass charismatic renewal; the idea of reenchantment occurring in mundane, everyday practices seems outside his horizons. Contrary to this view, it seems most consistent with a respect for personal narrative to believe that one vocation for social science—not *the* vocation but one honorable one—is to gather the fragments of these acts of reenchantment and suggest how their collective patterns offer exemplary answers to Tolstoy’s question of how we should live. The local and contingent solutions that people have found to how they should live are expressed as stories that recount past attempted solutions to how they should live and are part of their ongoing attempts to seek present ways of living.

To suggest how stories work to address the Tolstoy/Weber question of how we should live, allow me a brief autobiographical digression. As I enter late middle age I realize what a densely storied world I grew up in. My childhood was richly populated by grandparents and around them a traveling circus of great-aunts and great-uncles who came to town and stayed for lengths of time inversely related to their economic prosperity. But the reputations of these great-aunts and great-uncles depended not on their prosperity but on their abilities as storytellers; by their stories they were dreaded as bores or anticipated as good company, whatever the length of the visit. Stories were the hard currency of our family gatherings; they elevated conversation beyond small talk. Telling “a story” commanded respectful silence. Originality of stories garnered hardly any points at all; most of those present already knew the stories being told. What counted was the linkage between the small talk of the moment and the story—how well the transition was made—and how effectively the telling of the story focused the family attention.

These stories were mostly recollections of how family members, often the previous generation, had acted in some situation that had an analogy in the conversation that had recalled the story. I now read my daughter the fables of Brer Rabbit and realize how much my transplanted southern family told stories in that tradition of fable. The stories were about the kind of cleverness necessary to get on in the world, the kind of humour required to persevere, what people and situations to look out for, and what actions were memorable and even exemplary. The stories were familial moral education, reminding everyone who we were—and were not—and why that identity was valuable.

I am compelled to recollect that the specific moral lessons of many of these stories are not ones I would now affirm to my children. As might be expected of southern stories of that generation, many were racist. But—and this is a crucial point in my thinking about stories—what counted for me as a child, and what continues to count, is not the specific message of a certain story's content, but rather the sense of the world as a narratable place; that is, a place that stories can make sense of. Michael Bérubé (1996) writes that he tells stories about his family because for his son Jamie, who lives with Down syndrome, to be considered valuable as a human being, Jamie's actions must be just as "narratable" as those of his brother Nick (p. 127). Narratability means that events and lives are affirmed as being worth telling and thus worth living. Being narratable implies value and attributes reality.

I find a complementary concern for the importance of narratability in Richard Sennett's (1998) argument that character depends on engaging in work that is "legible" in allowing workers to know what they're doing. Sennett finds much contemporary work to be illegible. Stories give lives legibility; when shaped as narratives, lives come from somewhere and are going somewhere. Narratability provides for legibility and out of both comes a sense of morality—practical if tacit answers to how we should live. This morality is not fixed but is constantly being revised in subsequent stories, including retellings that put different emphases on old stories. I note with regret that my family engaged in too little narrative revisionism. No childhood is ideal.

Social theory has always been suspicious of what can become too personal. Weber worried about German youth who “crave not only religious experience but experience as such...this is where the modern intellectualist form of romantic irrationalism leads” (p. 143). We now read his concerns as prophetic, since we know where romantic irrationalism did lead in the decades after his speech. But the problem, I propose, is not that German youth were captured by stories; rather it is the particular stories they were captured by. If stories are dangerous, this is because they are powerful. This distinction is important when we get to contemporary objections to storytelling.

Weber’s pessimism about the craving for “experience as such” has been echoed recently by Zygmunt Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity* (2000), in which he approvingly quotes Paul Atkinson and David Silverman’s critique of “the interview society.”¹ Bauman’s criticism, as vague as it is with respect to what he is criticizing, is worth quoting at length:

Numerous studies [none are cited] show that personal narratives are merely rehearsals of public rhetorics designed by the public media to ‘represent subjective truths’. But the inauthenticity of the allegedly authentic self is thoroughly covered up by the spectacles of sincerity—the public rituals of in-depth interviews and public confessions of which chat-shows are the most prominent, though by no means the only examples. Ostensibly, the spectacles are meant to give vent to the stirrings of ‘inner selves’ striving to be let out; in fact, they are the vehicles of the consumer society version of a sentimental education: they display and stamp with public acceptability the yarn of emotive states and their expressions from which the ‘thoroughly personal identities’ are to be woven. (p. 86)

The context of this criticism is Bauman’s general argument that contemporary society has lost its capacity for what he likes to call “Politics with a capital P,” which I understand to mean people’s sustained civic involvements in the instigation of collective social change. I agree with Bauman’s observation of this decline and with his complementary argument

that “the idea of ‘the common good’ (let alone ‘the good society’) [is] branded suspect, threatening, nebulous or addle-brained” (p. 106). This loss of the common good seems at the core of what is increasingly called neo-liberalism (see Bourdieu, 1998a).² In particular, I agree that we live with “a new type of social uncertainty: ‘not knowing the ends instead of the traditional uncertainty of not knowing the means’” (p. 61; Bauman quotes Gerhard Schulze). I part company from Bauman over how to restore a sense of the common good and how to negotiate living with uncertainty as to ultimate ends. While he finds a symptom of these problems in the prominence afforded to narrative, I find a potential solution.

Bauman’s argument follows the tradition of those whom philosopher Charles Taylor (1991) calls “knockers” of the contemporary ideal of authenticity. Taylor describes knockers as “people who think that the whole language of self-fulfillment and finding one’s own path is suspect and either nonsense or a vehicle of self-indulgence” (p. 74). Knockers generally take two lines. One is what Taylor calls “a hard-line, scientific attitude to the world”; they find talk about authenticity to be “vague and woolly” (p. 74). The other line is humanist. They find emphasis on authenticity to be “an expression of moral laxity, or at least as reflecting simply a loss of the more stringent ideals formerly dominant in our culture” (pp. 74-75). Bauman seems to represent a third sort of politically-motivated knocker who fears that the narrative self is a ruse of commodity culture, individualizing social problems and distracting people away from the true calling of “Politics with a capital P.”

I agree with Bauman (2000) and other knockers that the task of social science and of public discourse generally is to link what C. Wright Mills called “personal troubles” to “public issues,” a link that neo-liberalism obscures or denies. But for me this linkage of personal troubles and public issues, which is the foundation of politics, begins in the cultivation of personal stories. People can move from experience to politics only when their experience is narratable to themselves and others, and thus made legible.

Storytelling is an occasion when people co-author responses to Tolstoy’s great question of what shall we do and how shall we live; not permanent answers applicable for the rest of their lives, but the crucial if provisional answers that guide what to do next and how to live now.

Taylor’s understanding of authenticity provides a central argument that personal stories are both a response to disenchantment and a beginning of politics. Taylor’s singular contribution, as I read him, is his demonstration that personal authenticity is not, strictly speaking, personal at all; authenticity is a *dialogical* achievement. The core of Taylor’s argument seems to be this:

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands. (p. 41)

The knocker position seems to be that our (postmodern) personal stories lack reference to what Taylor calls “things that matter,” and so these stories have become a *cul de sac* of

triviality, an abyss into which persons, politics, and thought itself threaten to fall. Taylor recognizes the kernel of truth in this response; thus he takes seriously Allan Bloom, probably the best-selling of any knocker, who finds in claims of authenticity “a rather facile relativism” in which “everybody has his or her own ‘values,’ and about these it is impossible to argue” (p. 13). Bloom’s suspicion of relativist individualism is echoed by Bauman (2000), who fears that “the idea of common interests, and most notably *negotiated* common interests, [have become] all the more incredible and fanciful, and the ability and will to pursue them all the less likely to appear” (p. 106).

I myself have tried to show (Frank, 2000b; 2000c; forthcoming) how culture exerts enormous pressure on people to settle for identities that are trivial in Taylor’s specific sense of lacking “the background of things that matter.” The pitfall of such arguments is their attempts to specify, even legislate, what can count as things that matter; terms of affirmation invariably reflect what Bourdieu (1998b) calls the habitus, taste, or cultural capital of whoever is doing the affirming. Thus talk of “things that matter” readily becomes what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence: convincing some groups that what matters to them is inferior, thus they are inferior.

My response to this crucial problem is to return to stories. Things come to matter and continue to matter insofar as they instigate stories that affirm those things in relation to how lives are lived. Thus I find most significant Taylor’s argument that the knockers don’t “seem to recognize that there is *a powerful moral ideal* at work here [in the search

for authenticity], however debased and travestied its expression might be” (15; emphases added). In that failure of recognition lies the knockers’ potential for symbolic violence.

Taylor describes this moral ideal as “being true to oneself” (p. 15) and he traces its genealogy from the early Romantics, especially Herder (see pp. 28-29). Taylor’s eventual point is that being true to oneself requires an orientation to what is *beyond* oneself: truth to oneself requires values such as the “things that matter” enumerated in the quotation above. How well anyone orients his or her life according to these things that matter requires on-going dialogical recognition from others that one’s life expresses values they share. On Taylor’s account, only the dialogical pursuit of authenticity will yield the “moral ideal” that offers “a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where ‘better’ and ‘higher’ are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire” (p. 16).

Taylor recognizes that what he calls “the liberalism of neutrality” involves a reluctance to accept the idea that “some forms of life are indeed *higher* than others” (p. 17; original emphasis). As suggested above, I find in Bourdieu’s work the strongest grounds for suspicion that some forms of life can be affirmed as higher than others. Yet to surrender any idea that some forms are higher would seem to require everyone, including Bourdieu, to give up holding values crucial to who they are; so we have a dilemma. The way out seems to involve not only accepting but affirming that standards of *higher*, while crucial at any moment in any life, cannot necessarily be universalized to other lives or to other moments of the same life. Ideals of higher can only be asserted with the humility that

these ideals are, in my terms, contingent, provisional, and local. Taylor adopts the motto of the Italian Red Brigade, “La lotta continua”: “The nature of a free society is that it will always be the locus of a struggle between higher and lower forms of freedom” (p. 78). The nature of being a free individual also seems to be perpetual engagement in this struggle.

Sociologist Alan Wolfe (2001) places this continual struggle at the core of what he calls contemporary moral freedom. Wolfe’s careful attention to people’s stories of how they construct their moral lives affirms empirically what Taylor observes philosophically. People need to create some standard of what is higher, otherwise they could not discriminate their own and others’ actions. But their standards are not fixed and their ongoing revision requires constant dialogical affirmation. Moral life takes place in the stories (including Wolfe’s interviews and his reporting of those interviews) through which that affirmation is sought.

Narrative analysis begins with an attitude toward stories. The knocker position is one such attitude, and perhaps the one most easily assumed when viewing the chat-shows that Bauman refers to, with their staging and saturated commercialization of storytelling. To see these stories as part of the struggle to construct moral life requires an imagination—found in Taylor and Wolfe—that I can only call democratic. Thus we reach a crucial issue. Does narrative analysis really believe that people can work out their own ideals of *higher* in their stories? Can we hear stories as attempts—“however debased and travestied” (Taylor, quoted above)—to render lives and experience legible and

dialogical? Can we hear others' stories as discoveries of what things matter to them—since “things that matter” are not there *a priori* but are discovered in the course of living and narrating. Can we hear stories as presentations of these new-found terms of valuing to others for their response, including both affirmation and revision?

Taylor concludes that “the cultural pessimism of the knockers is not only mistaken, it is also counter-productive. Because root-and-branch condemnation of the culture of authenticity is not a way to move us closer to the heights.” As to what those heights are, the “outcome is continually up for grabs” (p. 79). Perhaps what most annoys many knockers, who speak from considerable academic heights, is the democracy inherent in leaving the outcome up for grabs. The pervasive belief of those on the heights is that they know better where the outcome should lie. Instead Taylor proposes “‘la lotta continue,’ the struggle goes on—in fact, forever” (p. 78).

The “interview society” is often not a pretty sight, although that depends entirely on which interview scenes one looks at. The apology for the worst of these scenes is that most elections and most jury trials are not pretty sights either—recent history provides salient examples of the shortcomings of both. Yet democracy muddles on. Personally and collectively we reinvent ourselves as we go along, making extraordinary mistakes in the process but occasionally learning something from these.

I return to a qualitative methodologist's version of the great Tolstoyan question: What sense shall we make of the stories we hear, and how shall we represent these stories to

others? And beyond that the Weberian question: How is research on stories a vocation in disenchanted times?

The simple answer is that in disenchanted times, when the only consensus is that there are no grand narratives with sufficient charismatic force to elicit mass belief, people begin with their own stories and proceed by how these stories are accepted or criticized by their peers. But because the knockers make some important points about the dangers of personal stories—from Weber's fear of irrationality to Bauman's observed loss of the common good—the social scientist's responsibilities for analysis go beyond those of the folklorist who collects and archives stories that might otherwise be unrecorded and thus lost (indeed, most folklorists do a good deal more). In moving to the tasks of analysis, however, I hope to sustain the recognition that stories are not waiting for social scientists to endow them with sense. Narrative analysis needs all possible humility when asking what it can bring to stories.

Social scientists can begin with Bauman's observation that storytellers very often fail to understand the public rhetorics that they have appropriated. Thus storytellers may not be aware how their stories carry assumptions embedded in these rhetorics. It seems inescapable that any stories will be told in the conventional rhetoric of a cultural context. Social scientists can enhance the legibility of stories by showing how types of stories participate in conventional rhetorics. Yet people's stories are not what Bauman (quoted above) calls "merely rehearsals" of these rhetorics, nor does the use of these rhetorics render those stories any less authentic, in Taylor's use of that term. Storytellers face the

dilemma of only being able to question the assumptions of their social context by using the conventional rhetorics of that context. Narrative analysis can show how, even as stories participate in conventional rhetorics, they question the assumptions of the groups whose preferred reality is expressed in these rhetorics (see Nelson, 2001, as one example of such an analysis). As stories develop their own preferred rhetoric, narrative analysis can assist in the project of unpacking the assumptions embedded in that rhetoric. As Taylor observes, the struggle continues.

Narrative analysis can also call attention to the ways that stories seek what Taylor calls the heights of moral life. A moral analytic approach—whether based in sociology, nursing, or other disciplines—might begin with how stories sort out what makes some modes of life higher or better. The method for this enterprise might adapt the example of many psychotherapeutic clinicians, especially family therapists, who have moved away the older practice of offering their clients carefully timed interpretations of the stories they tell. In much contemporary therapeutic practice what counts is not to interpret the client's story, and certainly not to impose on it some diagnostic scheme (then classifying clients as resistant or non-compliant if they refuse to classify themselves according to this scheme). Instead therapy seeks to *punctuate* certain moments in the story that represent some movement, even if it is not yet clear where that movement is going (Palazzoli et al., 1978). In these punctuations, the therapist begins to co-create a new story with the client (White, 1995, 2000). Narrative analysis can proceed along similar lines. Our task, I believe, is to show where moments in some collection of stories represent the kind of moral impulse that Taylor describes as the basis of authenticity.

Taking seriously Taylor's argument about the moral impulse of authenticity seems to instigate at least these questions, among others:

How does a story detail *practices* in which the teller *claims an identity*? How does the identity claimed in the story depend on certain values that go beyond the self, and how does the personal story make a claim for some social values and against others? These questions reflect the recognition that the story is not, as Bauman imagines it, a spectacle "of 'inner selves' striving to be let out." Stories are attempts of a self to find identity in terms outside itself.

How does the act of storytelling work *dialogically*, not so much to claim others' recognition for the self's authenticity, but rather to fashion that authenticity out of recognitions that the story provides for? How are dialogical relationships both the topic of the story, its *content*, and also the goal of telling the story, its *process*? Again, authenticity is interpersonal. Before Taylor's emphasis on dialogue comes the classic statement of Mikhail Bakhtin (1929/1984), writing on Dostoevsky: "To portray the inner man...was possible only by portraying his communion with another. Only in communion, in the interactions of one person with another, can the 'man in man' be revealed, for others as well as for oneself" (p. 252). Stories, as dialogue, do not present a self formed before the story is told. Rather in stories the person "becomes for the first time that which [she or] he is—and we repeat, not only for others but for himself [or herself] as well" (p. 252). Narrative analysis can show how that process of becoming "for the first time" works, even as the analysis itself is another stage in this on-going process.

How do stories address disenchantment? How do groups of stories build communities in response to shared disenchantments? These questions reflect the persistence of the moral impulse in people's lives. People do seek what is better and they form communities based on agreements about what is better. These communities are reaffirmed in shared stories that display those values, even as new stories question old values and propose revisions to what is considered better. Values in this sense reflect not only individual preferences but communal narratives.

Finally, I want to make explicit that my whole argument has implicitly been about the ethics of research into stories, or as I prefer to say, the moral auspices of such research. Qualitative methodologists agree that the ethical issue is not simply attaining the respondent's consent to have his or her story recorded and analyzed. There has been less discussion about what constitutes *respect* for stories in narrative analysis. Narrative analysis entails extensive ethical obligations. The researcher who solicits people's stories does not simply collect data but assents to enter into a relationship with the respondent and become part of that person's on-going struggle ("la lotta continua") toward a moral life. As I suggested earlier, that struggle is about narratability and legibility.

This relationship does not require that researcher accept the morality of the story as it is told—quite the contrary. If the dialogical recognition of the story is worth valuing, that recognition must, on occasion, be withheld. The moral impulse of telling any story includes taking the risk that the listener, who may be a researcher, may not offer the recognition that the teller seeks. But there are levels of recognition, and it is possible to

recognize the storyteller's moral impulse to make life narratable, even while rejecting the specific morality of the content. And then the listener's rejection may, in turn, be accepted or rejected by the original storyteller in the generation of a new story, as the struggle continues.

Narrative analysis, on this account, goes far beyond the production of knowledge from and about people's stories. The process of narrative research—research as participating in storytelling—has the potential to model how members of society can most usefully recognize each other's stories. Rather than bemoan the low condition of storytelling in the “interview society,” researchers can lead the process of storytelling toward something better. People are not going to stop telling stories; moral life, for better and worse, takes place in storytelling. Narrative analysis can be a significant model for a society that will continue to work out its moral dilemmas in story form.

I conclude with the big Weberian issue with which I began (and with which Taylor begins). If stories are told to provide provisional moments of reenchancement, how is that reenchancement to be cared for, as someone starting a fire on a cold night cares for a faintly glowing ember or spark? Our task in disenchanted times is to hear and to amplify those sparks of moral impulse in stories that are too often debased and travestied in their expression (using Taylor's phrase for a third time). Narrative analyses that offer readers ways to hear in the story what Taylor calls “a standard of what we ought to desire” is, I believe, being far more critical—in the sense of constructively evaluative—than any of the knockers of such stories.

Hearing authenticity in its contemporary idiom has never been easy. To return again to Weber, let me note that one of his great intellectual and emotional struggles was with Freudianism, which he first opposed and then made some peace with; how far that peace might have extended is one of the questions left forever open by his untimely death. Freud's ideas were Weber's contemporary idiom of the search for authenticity. Searching for the moral impulse in our own contemporary idioms of authenticity requires imagination and a democratic faith. Hearing the moral impulse in others' stories enables us to become part of their struggle to reenchant a disenchanted world. Failing to hear this impulse we seem doomed to a pessimism that can only lament what is not. Such pessimism, I believe, articulates all too well with neo-liberalism, which as political economic practice first deforms the personal and then holds up this deformed version of personal life to attest to its core belief that people are only consumers. By affirming the authenticity of the personal, narrative analysis can initiate a significant political intervention.

Notes

1. See also Atkinson, 1997 and my response, Frank, 2000a.
2. For those not familiar with the term, the core beliefs of neo-liberalism are the superiority of the market over the polity in setting priorities for society, the imperative to globalize markets, and the complementary devaluation of the state as an instrument of social change. Public services are held to be inherently less efficient than the private sector, and any state regulation is viewed with suspicion as unwarranted restraint on trade. The citizen becomes the taxpayer, and in the payment of taxes what counts is the expectation of services in return for investment, not contribution to the common good.

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