

# 1

## Stories in Society

---

Stories have captivated social researchers ever since Henry Mayhew (1861–1862/1968) and his associates conducted observational surveys of London’s “humbler classes” in the 1850s. In the preface to Volume 1 of the study report, Mayhew indicated that, until then, what was known about the poor and their labor had been drawn from elite and administrative accounts. Those in the know provided information about the lives of those ostensibly without the knowledge or wherewithal to do so on their own. Members of the humbler classes were viewed as incapable of offering useful opinions, much less sensible descriptions of their circumstances. They were considered ignorant, if not incommunicative and irrational, subject to whimsy and exaggeration. Why ask them about their social world when others could provide more cogent accounts?

Mayhew’s strategy was to turn this around and, instead, begin by assuming that, while perhaps crude in the eyes of their betters, members of the humbler classes could speak for themselves. Like others, they could provide their own accounts of experience, even while the accounts required professional polish to turn them into public information. The humbler classes’ own stories, in other words, could be the basis of knowledge about their lives and labor. Referring to this unconventional perspective, Mayhew described his study as “curious for many reasons.”

It surely may be considered curious as being the first attempt to publish the history of a people, from the lips of the people themselves—giving a literal description of their labour, their earnings, their trials, and their sufferings, in their *own* [italics added] “unvarnished” language; and to portray the condition

#### 4 Narrative Reality

of their homes and their families by personal observation of the places, and direct communion with the individuals. (Vol. 1, p. xv)

Continuing to underscore the study's novel approach, Mayhew was compelled to justify his research. He explained that the study filled a void of solid information about "a large body of persons," meaning the London poor, whose existence wasn't officially recognized.

It is curious, moreover, as supplying information concerning a large body of persons, of whom the public had less knowledge than the most distant tribes of the earth—the government population returns not even numbering them among the inhabitants of the kingdom; and as adducing facts so extraordinary, that the traveler in the undiscovered country of the poor, like Bruce, until his stories are corroborated by after investigators, be content to lie under the imputation of telling such tales, as travelers are generally supposed to delight in. (Vol. 1, p. xv)

If curious, the portrayal offered in the volumes of *London Labour and the London Poor* is described as nonetheless valid in its empirical claims.

Be the faults of the present volume what they may, assuredly they are rather short-comings than exaggerations, for in every instance the author and his coadjutors have sought to understate, and most assuredly never to exceed the truth. . . . Within the last two years some thousands of the humbler classes of society must have been seen and visited with the especial view of noticing their condition and learning their histories; and it is but right that the truthfulness of the poor generally should be made known; for though checks have been usually adopted, the people have been mostly found to be astonishingly correct in their statements,—so much so indeed, that the attempts at deception are certainly the exceptions rather than the rule. (Vol. 1, p. xv)

Mayhew concludes the preface on a moral tone. This will resonate in the future with similar indigenous studies of the disadvantaged on both sides of the Atlantic. These studies aimed to bring into view for purposes of social reform the stories that may have frequently been told, but that were largely unheard.

My earnest hope is that the book may serve to give the rich a more intimate knowledge of the sufferings, and the frequent heroism under those sufferings, of the poor—that it may teach those who are beyond temptation to look with charity on the frailties of their less fortunate brethren—and cause those in "high places," and those of whom much is expected, to bestir themselves to improve the condition of a class of people whose misery, ignorance, and vice, amidst all the immense wealth and great knowledge of "the first city of the world," is, to say the very least, a national disgrace to us. (Vol. 1, p. xv)

## “Own Stories” and Social Worlds

In the first excerpt above from Mayhew’s preface, we emphasized the word “own” to make a point. While truthful portrayals of the unseen world of London’s poor were rare, it was important that those eventually produced were faithful to the poor’s unvarnished words and their own accounts of life. This launched a tradition of research that oriented to what American sociologist Clifford Shaw (1930) later would refer as “own story” material. Shaw believed that stories conveyed by those whose experience was under consideration were more telling, truthful, and useful than stories drawn from other sources. In a sense, Shaw assumed that those in question owned their stories and should be treated as proper proprietors. Their lives should not be conveyed by outsiders, if such accounts existed at all. Stories of indigenous life told in people’s own words were more authentic than stories offered in others’ words. The phrase “in their own words” would thus add to the significance of their “own story,” encouraging researchers to seek native accounts of indigenous life. This required that such accounts be sought in situ and as unobtrusively as possible. The researcher should listen to and faithfully record “their own stories,” avoiding “contamination” at all cost. It posed quite a challenge, as the individuals being studied were often portrayed as dangerous inhabitants of mysterious and threatening social worlds.

Shaw’s own work is exemplary. Writing of the “value of the delinquent boy’s own story,” Shaw (1930) describes his initial contact with Stanley, the subject of his book *The Jack-Roller*. The book is a “case-study of the career of a young male delinquent, to whom we will refer as Stanley.” It provides an inside glimpse of Stanley’s social world. The term “jack-roller” was part of the vernacular of the times, referring to the mugging of “jacks” or drunk working men. Younger males took advantage of the jacks’ inebriation to rob them of their money, especially at the end of the workweek on payday.

The case is one of a series of two hundred similar studies of repeated male offenders under seventeen years of age, all of whom were on parole from correctional institutions when the studies were made. The author’s contact with Stanley has extended over a period of six years, the initial contact having been made when Stanley was sixteen years of age. During this period it was possible to make a rather intensive study of his behavior and social background and to carry out a somewhat intensive study of social treatment. (p. 1)

The value of Stanley’s story is made clear as Shaw continues.

The case is published to illustrate the value of the “own story” in the study and treatment of the delinquent child. As a preparation for the interpretation of

## 6 Narrative Reality

Stanley's life-history, which comprises the major portion of this volume, a brief description of the more general uses of "own story" material, along with illustrations from a number of different cases, is presented in this chapter. (p. 1)

Echoing Mayhew, Shaw addresses the "unique feature" of own story material. We again hear references to their "own words" and the importance of recording them in what Mayhew called "unvarnished language." Shaw is palpably excited at the scientific prospects of using this "new device of sociological research," affirming that social truths be conveyed according to their subjects.

The life-history record is a comparatively new device of sociological research in the field of criminology, although considerable use has been made of such material in other fields. The life-record itself is the delinquent's own account of his experiences, written as an autobiography, as a diary, or presented in the course of a series of interviews. The unique feature of such documents is that they are recorded in the first person, in the boy's own words, and not translated into the language of the person investigating the case. (p. 1)

A decade later, sociologist William Foote Whyte (1943) continues the emphasis on indigenous stories in his classic study of the Boston Italian immigrant slum he calls "Cornerville." The opening paragraphs echo the "we-them" distinction resonant in Mayhew's plea for accurate knowledge of London's poor. As Whyte initially addresses his reader, it's evident he assumes that there is a story there (in Cornerville), but one that, because of broader social attitudes, remains untold. It is Cornerville's own story, one that, like the story of London's humbler classes, is silent in the face of the immense wealth and great knowledge of the elite Boston community.

In the heart of "Eastern City" there is a slum district known as Cornerville, which is inhabited almost exclusively by Italian immigrants and their children. To the rest of the city it is a mysterious, dangerous, and depressing area. Cornerville is only a few minutes' walk from fashionable High Street, but the High Street inhabitant who takes that walk passes from the familiar to the unknown. (p. xv)

The subsequent parallel with Mayhew's prefatory comments is remarkable.

Respectable people have access to a limited body of information upon Cornerville. They may learn that it is one of the most congested areas in the United States. It is one of the chief points of interest in any tour organized to show upper-class people the bad housing conditions in which lower-class people live. Through sight-seeing or statistics one may discover that bathtubs are rare, that children overrun the narrow and neglected streets, that the juvenile delinquency rate is high, that crime is prevalent among adults. (p. xv)

We are eventually told in a tone of surprise that this world has its own moral order, the inference being that it is as regulated and comprehensive as the familiar haunts of fashionable High Street. The punch line leading to “their own story” is clear. As if to say that human beings, unlike cardboard figures, have stories of their own to tell located in the integral scenes of their lives, Whyte concludes:

In this view, Cornerville people appear as social work clients, as defendants in criminal cases, or as undifferentiated members of “the masses.” There is one thing wrong with such a picture: no human beings are in it. Those who are concerned with Cornerville seek through a general survey to answer questions that require the most intimate knowledge of local life. The only way to gain such knowledge is to live in Cornerville and participate in the activities of its people. One who does that finds that the district reveals itself to him in an entirely different light. The buildings, streets, and alleys that formerly represented dilapidation and physical congestion recede to form a familiar background for the actors upon the Cornerville scene. (pp. xv-xvi)

Whyte moves on to present Cornerville’s story in its own unvarnished language, featuring racketeers, “big shots,” and the gangs he calls the corner boys and the college boys. Whyte’s interest in indigenous accounts reflects that of his predecessors, Mayhew and Shaw. He is keenly attuned to unrecognized social worlds, told in terms of inhabitants’ “own stories.”

Stories such as those relayed by members of the humbler classes, by Stanley and other delinquents, and by the corner and the college boys, were taken to portray social worlds. Individual accounts were not as important sociologically as what individuals told about the worlds they inhabited. While *The Jack-Roller* is all about Stanley’s life in poverty and his experience as a juvenile delinquent, through his story we learn about the world of juvenile delinquency as it plays out in a great metropolis, in this case in the city of Chicago. Whyte’s book, *Street Corner Society*, is about gang leaders Doc, Chick, and their boys, but the individual stories are presented as comprising “the social structure of an Italian slum,” the subtitle of Whyte’s book. Individual accounts add up to something more than biographical particulars, namely, stories of social worlds on their own terms.

## Narratives of Inner Life

Psychological interest in individual stories moves in another direction. While continuing to emphasize their own stories, narratives in this case are viewed as windows on inner life rather than on social worlds. Eschewing indirect

## 8 Narrative Reality

methods such as projective techniques and psychoanalysis, ordinary life stories are taken to reveal “who we are” as persons; they are the way individuals construct their identities as active agents of their lives. Inner life is a product of “narrative knowing,” as counseling psychologist Donald Polkinghorne (1988) puts it. The first sentences of the introduction to his exemplary book *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* set the stage for this perspective.

Experience is meaningful and human behavior is generated from and informed by this meaningfulness. Thus, the study of human behavior needs to include an exploration of the meaning systems that form human experience. This book is an inquiry into narrative, the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful. (p. 1)

As if to say that inner life comes to us by way of stories, Polkinghorne outlines how the “realms of human experience” are constructed through narrative expression. The last chapter of the book actually identifies narrative with human experience. If human experience is viewed as narrative, our stories become our selves; narratives structure who we are as meaningful beings in the world.

The basic figuration process that produces the human experience of one’s own life and action and the lives and actions of others is the narrative. Through the action of emplotment, the narrative form constitutes human reality into wholes, manifests human values, and bestows meaning on life. (p. 159)

There is a parallel between this “inner lives” approach to narrative and the “social worlds” perspective on stories. If Mayhew, Shaw, Whyte, and other sociological researchers point to social worlds by presenting members’ accounts of experience, Polkinghorne and those with a psychological interest in stories view the presentation of narrative accounts as the hearable embodiments of inner life. As William Randall (1995) implies in the title of his book *The Stories We Are*, we *are* our stories. The book is an “essay on self-creation,” which is its subtitle. Narrativity looms in importance in both views. It is a conduit to, if not constitutive of, domains of social and psychological experience that are otherwise hidden.

A key text representing the inner lives perspective is psychologist Dan McAdams’s (1993) book *The Stories We Live By*. Asking what life stories are about, the author directs us inward rather than to our social surroundings, the viewpoint apparent in the book’s opening paragraphs. It’s telling that the word “own” appears again, this time resonating with individual uniqueness rather than with social distinction.

If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if *I* want to know *myself*, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story. I must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of the self—the personal myth—that I have tacitly, even unconsciously, composed over the course of my years. It is a story I continue to revise, and tell to myself (and sometimes to others) as I go on living. (p. 11)

This is a story that changes, rearticulating the developing inner life it represents, paralleling the sociological view that changing social worlds are constructed in their unfolding narratives. For McAdams, the storied possibilities of inner life are endless, limited only by the narrative imagination. Describing the personal myth, McAdams leads us within to the created domains of the self.

First and foremost, [personal myth] is a special kind of story that each of us naturally constructs to bring together the different parts of ourselves and our lives into a purposeful and convincing whole. . . . A personal myth is an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future. As both author and reader, we come to appreciate our own myth for its beauty and its psychosocial truth. (p. 12)

Certain of personal narrative's ultimate reference point, McAdams refers us to a "secret" place within, sometimes shared with others, and known most purely in epiphanic moments of truth.

Though we may act out parts of our personal myth in daily life, the story is inside of us. It is made and remade in the secrecy of our own minds, both conscious and unconscious, and for our own psychological discovery and enjoyment. In moments of great intimacy, we may share important episodes with another person. And in moments of great insight, parts of the story may become suddenly conscious, or motifs we had believed to be trivial may suddenly appear to be self-defining phenomena. (p. 12)

## Stanley's Story *in* Society

As insightful as these perspectives are, they provide limited information about the occasions on which their respective stories are told, about what Alan Dundes (1980) stresses are the "folk" features of folklore and Richard Bauman (1986) might call the "performative environment" of narratives. Certainly, chance utterances in an account might indeed refer to occasion or circumstance. An interviewee, for example, might ask the interviewer,

## 10 Narrative Reality

“Do you mean when I’m at home or at work?” Or an informant might say “Things are like that during the week, but it’s a different place on the weekend.” Otherwise, significant details about storytelling settings are often missing in individual accounts either of inner life or of social worlds. Transcripts, for example, usually don’t reveal a setting’s discursive conventions. They don’t specify what is usually talked about, avoided, or frowned upon. They often are silent about the consequences (for storytellers and others) of communicating stories in particular ways. While there is no strict line of demarcation between stories and storytelling, we need to know the details and working conditions of narrative occasions if we are to understand narrative as it operates within society.

Stories are assembled and told to someone, somewhere, at some time, for different purposes, and with a variety of consequences. These factors have a discernible impact on what is communicated and how that unfolds—whether that is taken to be about inner life or about a social world. A life story might be told to a spouse, to a lover, to a drinking buddy, to an employer, to a clergyman, to a therapist, to a son or daughter, or to a team member, among the huge variety of audiences. The occasion might be a job interview, part of a pick-up line, a confession, or a recovery tale. The consequences might be amusing or life threatening. The point is that the environments of storytelling mediate the internal organization and meaning of accounts.

Let’s revisit Shaw’s presentation of Stanley’s story as a pathway to considering how stories take shape within society. Direct references to storytelling occasionally do appear in *The Jack-Roller* as Stanley describes his world. But Shaw’s focus on the content of the story and his decided interest in the social world of juvenile delinquency eclipses what could otherwise come into view. Shaw understandably overlooks what Stanley is *doing* with words as Stanley tells his own story. Shaw’s focus is on insider information for its value in understanding the delinquent life. As Shaw notes at the start, case studies, especially in the form of subjects’ own stories, serve to reveal with greater depth social worlds on their own terms. According to Shaw, case studies are ideal for getting beyond and beneath the surface facts provided by official statistics.

In considering what Shaw overlooks, it is important to keep in mind that Stanley conveys some of his story in the context of his experience in the Illinois State Reformatory, to which he was sent when he was 15 years old. Shaw explains that this “institution receives commitments of youthful male offenders between the ages of 16 and 26” (p. 103), so Stanley had many other delinquent youths to look up to or look down upon on the premises. Status, apparently, was an important feature of inmates’ social ties, something that is glaringly obvious as Stanley tells his story. If Shaw argues that the



delinquent boy's "own story" compellingly reveals his social world, he fails to notice that Stanley's account is descriptively variegated, that Stanley actively shapes his story to fit the circumstances. More generally, Shaw fails to notice that stories operate *within* society as much as they are about society.

Consider how Stanley describes the daily round of life in the institution, an environment that poses distinct challenges to how Stanley stories himself. We begin with his first days in a cell, which make him "heartsick." We also hear about the role his cell mate plays in helping him "get used to things."

When the whistle blew for breakfast the next morning I was heartsick and weak, but after visiting with my cell mate, who took prison life with a smile and as a matter of course, I felt better. He said, "You might as well get used to things here; you're a 'convict' now, and tears won't melt those iron bars."  
(pp. 103–104)

Stanley looks up to his cell mate Bill and, interestingly enough, Stanley virtually steps out of his story to inform the listener/reader that what one says about oneself is narratively occasioned. Referring to his cell mate, Stanley explains,

He [the cell mate] was only seventeen, but older than me, and was in for one to ten years for burglaries. He delighted in telling about his exploits in crime, to impress me with his bravery and daring, and made me look up to him as a hero. Almost all young crooks like to tell about their accomplishments in crime. Older crooks are not so glib. They are hardened, and crime has lost its glamour and becomes a matter of business. Also, they have learned the dangers of talking too much and keep their mouths shut except to trusted friends. But Bill (my cell partner) talked all the time about himself and his crimes. I talked, too, and told wild stories of adventure, some true and some lies, for I couldn't let Bill outdo me just for lack of a few lies on my part. (p. 104)

Given the situated nature of this account—which narratively orients to Stanley's relationship with other inmates and what that means for his social status—it is apparent that this is far from simply being Stanley's "own" story. Stanley actively shapes what he says to enhance his standing with Bill and other inmates. The account is evidently sensitive to its circumstances. The content and the theme of the story are as much a matter of what Stanley does to enhance his position with cell mates as they are faithful renditions of his social world. At this point in his narrative, Stanley can be viewed as telling us that he occasionally does *status work* when he recounts his experience. His storytelling has a purpose beyond straightforward description.

## 12 Narrative Reality

We might figure in this regard that a particular narrative environment (the reformatory) and narrative occasion (a recollection within an interview) mediate the content and emphasis of the story being told. The environment and the occasion “own” the story as much as Stanley does. And there is no reason not to believe that other narrative environments and narrative occasions would do the same. Stanley’s storytelling responds as much to the practical contingencies of storytelling, as it reflects Stanley’s social world. In his way, Stanley knows that the organization of his story and his circumstances as a storyteller are narratively intertwined.

There is other evidence that Stanley’s presence in the reformatory prompts accounts that not only shape his social world but implicate his inner life. In the following excerpt, notice how Stanley laments his lack of narrative resources and what that means for who he is within.

So I listened with open ears to what was said in these groups of prisoners. Often I stood awe-struck as tales of adventure in crime were related, and I took it in with interest. Somehow I wanted to go out and do the same thing myself. To myself I thought I was somebody to be doing a year at Pontiac, but in these groups of older prisoners I felt ashamed because I couldn’t tell tales of daring exploits about my crimes. I hadn’t done anything of consequence. I compared myself with the older crooks and saw how little and insignificant I was in the criminal line. But deep in my heart I knew that I was only a kid and couldn’t be expected to have a reputation yet. I couldn’t tell about my charge, for it savored of petty thievery, and everybody looked down on a petty thief in Pontiac. I felt humiliated in the extreme, so I only listened. (pp. 108–109)

A bit later, Stanley refers to a different narrative environment. The context this time isn’t storytelling among reformatory inmates, but rather banter among male peers who gather on a city street corner. This now is Stanley putting his narrative skills and his story to work for a different purpose. The representational needs of this occasion entail the construction of both status and masculinity. Once again, the circumstances of storytelling are taken into consideration in shaping what Stanley’s story turns out to be, the internal and external organization of the account interrelated.

I went out to look for work, but it was scarce at the time. After a week of fruitless effort, I began to loaf around with the corner gang. These fellows were all working and doing well, but they had the habit of hanging around the corner and telling dirty stories about women. We took pride in telling about our exploits with such and such a girl, and tried to outdo each other in the number of women that we had conquered. (p. 118)

## Conclusion

These extracts from *The Jack-Roller*, and Stanley's keen attention to the narrative reality in which his stories are embedded, turn us to how stories operate within society. While the content and organization of stories such as Stanley's are an abiding concern, a focus on narrative reality also directs us to how social circumstances figure in storytelling. This leads us to the important questions we will take up in this book: How are stories activated and put together in practice? How do circumstances mediate what is assembled? What are the strategic uses of storytelling? And how do the personal and social purposes and consequences of storytelling shape their accounts?

