

Stories and Storytelling

Stories are narratives people tell about experiences, events, personal or collective memories, or aspects of individual biographies. They may be shared orally, through the written word, or through other modes of communication. **Storytelling** is the practice of sharing narratives with self, others, or with researchers. From a theoretical perspective, **storytelling** is often explained as something that individuals use to create meaning in their own lives. From this perspective stories and **storytelling** are communication tools used to organize and interpret collective and individual phenomena as well as to make sense of personal and shared experiences and to experience dialogue.

Scholars gather stories as empirical data to meet a large variety of research needs. Data collection may involve gathering original stories told only to the researcher, stories that are widely known and commonly shared orally across generations within a community, stories that are published in different media, or even bits of communication that were never intended to be stories in the traditional sense but that still display a narrative-like structure. For example, visual elements of a building might be seen to be bits of information that together create the story that the building tells.

This entry explores the nature and key elements of stories and **storytelling** in dialogue and in communication theory and the ways in which stories can be used as a tool for investigating various processes whereby meaning is produced, identity expressed, and reality constructed. The entry also explains how narrative methodologies can be used to create a more democratic research process.

Storytelling is a form of performance in which we use our imagination and intellect to understand others and ourselves. As Roland Barthes asserted, narratives are numberless. Thus **storytelling** can be viewed as means for ordering potentially disconnected experiences into mutually interrelated, meaningful episodes of a larger plot, be that a biography or a common history. To tell a story, therefore, is to perform a meaningful individual and social act. In other words, individuals construct realities such as their identity by telling and retelling narratives about themselves (inevitably in relation to others) and thereby making sense of their experiences.

Scholars interested in stories and **storytelling** contend that stories about self and others are locally conditioned, which means individuals' accounts are influenced by predominant forms of communication, or discourse, related to the experiences they are trying to work out. These other related discourses shape the individual's lived experience of self. From the moment stories are selected for telling, to the way in which they are introduced, shared, and commented upon, individual narratives are placed within larger frames of moral propriety, decorum, and common popular knowledge that stipulate notions of right and wrong, true and false, and aesthetically valuable and valueless. Consider, for example, the typical accounts heard on daytime talk shows. Guests tell stories about their lives that connect them to common understandings of what it means to be good or bad and honest or dishonest, and they tell stories that reflect what is expected in talk shows about values and mores.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz refers to communicators' own understanding of their stories as experience-near, while researchers may be able to explain these understandings to broader social themes and discourses that are experience-distant. For Geertz, local discourses guide how they tell their stories in a way that gives meaning to their experience. Sociologists James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium suggest that even though available discourses

may, to a great extent, structure the content of what people will narrate, it is very important to try and understand how people will interpret and negotiate those discourses and how they will tell stories.

Storytellers make their life experiences understandable by explaining choices and actions in relation to goals and outcomes, thereby expressing their identities within a personally meaningful plot. Thus the self is dialogic because people negotiate their sense of self and identity through composing, organizing, and performing stories in a coherent account. This process of making meaning is part of the social construction of reality.

Narrative researchers sometimes share their own stories in order to achieve an egalitarian ethic in inviting the stories of others. By sharing part of themselves in the **storytelling** process, researchers can achieve a more deeply democratic playing field between interviewer and interviewee. This kind of interview style is known as interactive dialogic interview. Such interviews aim less to gain information about the other person and more to experience the dialogical process itself. The ability to share stories and make interpersonal connections between interviewer and interviewee allows for experiences to resonate at a human level; ultimately, the hope is that those who read the research will themselves become part of the dialogic exchange, empathizing more deeply with and drawing a more profound humanistic meaning from the research. The dialogical process of story sharing in an interview setting also allows for the hierarchical boundaries typical of question-and-answer exchange to be broken down.

In communication studies, dialogue theory takes its roots from the work of Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. These key figures see dialogue as an essential ethical moment that enables effective and egalitarian communication. Taken from this perspective, communication scholars in the postmodern tradition see **storytelling** as a way to promote and encourage dialogue. **Storytelling** allows scholars to understand the realities faced by participants and promotes a collaborative ethical approach to gathering data.

—April Vannini

Further Readings

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