

The Trouble with Stories

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Born in England but soon transplanted to Ontario, Stephen Leacock left Canada to do a Ph.D. with Thorstein Veblen at the University of Chicago. After four years, Leacock returned definitively to Canada, but this time to Montreal; he eventually chaired McGill Uni-

AUTHORS NOTE: Ronald Aminzade, Mustafa Emirbayer, Roberto Franzosi, Herbert Gans, Jan Hoem, John Krinsky, Charles Lemert, John Markoff, Ann Mische, Victor Nee, Bernice Pescosolido, Francesca Polletta, Marilyn Rosenthal, Harrison White, and Viviana Zelizer provided helpful comments on earlier drafts. I also have benefited from an electronic discussion of these issues initiated by Polletta and then joined energetically by Jeff Broadbent, Marco Giugni, Jack Goldstone, Jeff Goodwin, Michael Hanagan, Roger Karapin, Howard Lune, and Heather Williams. It is only fair to record that (1) Mische, Polletta, and some of the electronic debaters vigorously dispute my claims that what I call *standard stories* are relatively invariant in structure and dominant in everyday social analyses and that (2) I have done no formal collection and analysis of stories to back up my arguments. I base my assertions about the form and prevalence of standard stories not only on everyday observation, some experience in life history interviewing, and long exposure to written accounts (fictional and otherwise) of social life but also on impressions gained from cataloging and coding perhaps 150,000 reports concerning different types of popular contention that my collaborators and I have abstracted from periodicals, administrative correspondence, chronicles, and related sources. Fortunately, the dispute is open to empirical adjudication; it should encourage readers to bring their own observations and evidence to bear on the actual structure of everyday storytelling. However such an empirical inquiry comes out, its results will clarify the origins, structures, and effects of social stories and thereby help specify effective ways in which to teach, learn, investigate, and explain social processes.

versity's Department of Economics and Political Science. In that vein, his *Elements of Political Science* (Leacock 1921) merited translation into 17 languages. As Leacock grew older and wiser, however, he turned increasingly from economics and political science to humor such as his droll classic *Literary Lapses*. He titled that book's final story "A, B, and C. The Human Element in Mathematics." It concerns stories Leacock ([1910] 1957) wrote,

The student of arithmetic who has mastered the first four rules of his art, and successfully striven with money sums and fractions, finds himself confronted by an unbroken expanse of questions known as problems. These are short stories of adventure and industry with the end omitted, and though betraying a strong family resemblance, are not without a certain element of romance.

The characters in the plot of a problem are three people called A, B, and C. The form of the question is generally of this sort:

"A, B, and C do a certain piece of work. A can do as much work in one hour as B in two or C in four. Find how long they work at it." (p. 141)

A, B, and C rowed on rivers, pumped water from cisterns, dug ditches, and otherwise competed strenuously, always to the disadvantage of C. Leacock ([1910] 1957) reveals what he learned from survivor D: C died of exhaustion after yet another grueling contest with A and B. A then lost interest in competition as B languished in his grief until he "abjured mathemat-

ics and devoted himself to writing the history of the Swiss Family Robinson in words of one syllable" (p. 146).

Under Leacock's pen, the abstract relations of algebra give way to human interest stories. His readers can chuckle because they instantly recognize the conceit. Alas, the same does not hold for sociology's readers. The trouble with reading, writing, and learning sociology is straightforward but formidable; people ordinarily cast their accounts of social life as stories—stories, as we shall see, with distinctive causal structures. Such stories do crucial work in patching social life together. But sociology's strongest insights do not take the form of stories and often undermine the stories people tell.

By *stories*, I do not mean rhetoric, the artful use of language to convince readers that the writer tells the truth. Nor do I mean the straightforward chronologies of events that appear in sources such as personnel records, marriage registers, and machine inspection logs. Although reading notes, court proceedings, political tracts, and advertisements sometimes incorporate stories in the narrow sense I am pursuing here, I am not including all of them under the heading "stories." I mean the sequential, explanatory recounting of connected, self-propelled people and events that we sometimes call tales, fables, or narratives. Let us call these sequential, explanatory accounts of self-motivated human action *standard stories*.

Standard Stories

To construct a standard story, start with a limited number of interacting characters, individual or collective. Your characters may be persons, but they also may be organizations such as churches and states or even abstract categories such as social classes and regions. Treat your characters as independent, conscious, and self-

motivated. Make all their significant actions occur as consequences of their own deliberations or impulses. Limit the time and space within which your characters interact. With the possible exception of externally generated accidents—you can call them "chance" or "acts of God"—make sure that everything that happens results directly from your characters' actions.

Now, supply your characters with specific motives, capacities, and resources. Furnish the time and place within which they are interacting with objects that you and they can construe as barriers, openings, threats, opportunities, and tools—as facilities and constraints bearing on their actions. Set your characters in motion. From their starting point, make sure that all their actions follow your rules of plausibility and produce effects on others that likewise follow your rules of plausibility. Trace the accumulated effects of their actions to some interesting outcome. Better yet, work your way backward from some interesting outcome, following all the same rules. Congratulations, you have just constructed a standard story.

In writing your standard story, you have crafted a text that resembles a play, a television sitcom episode, a fable, a news item, or a novel. But you also have produced something like the following:

- The account that a jury constructs from the testimony and evidence laid out during a trial
- A biography or an autobiography of a single character
- Explanations that people piece together at the scene of a grisly accident
- Histories that nationalists recount as they say why they have prior rights to a given territory
- Speeches of social movement leaders who are linking today's actions or demands to the movement's past

- The selective (and perhaps fanciful) account of his past with which a taxi driver regales his or her captive passengers during a long ride to the airport
- How people apologize for, or justify, their violations of other people's expectations: "I'm sorry, but . . ."
- What victims of a crime or a disaster demand when authorities say they do not know how or why it happened
- Conversations people carry on as they judge other people's sins, good deeds, successes, and failures
- How bosses and workers reply to the question "Why don't you folks ever hire any X's?"

Standard stories, in short, pop up everywhere. They lend themselves to vivid, compelling accounts of what has happened, what will happen, or what should happen. They do essential work in social life, cementing people's commitments to common projects, helping people make sense of what is going on, channeling collective decisions and judgments, spurring people to action they would otherwise be reluctant to pursue. Telling stories even helps people to recognize difficulties in their own perceptions, explanations, or actions, as when I tell a friend about a recent adventure only to remark—or to have my friend point out—a previously unnoticed contradiction among the supposed facts I have laid out.

Stories in Action

The sociological technique of interviewing (especially in the forms we call life histories or oral histories) benefits from the readiness of humans to package memory in standard stories. Although all of us have recollections we would prefer not to share with interviewers, in my

own interviewing I have generally found people delighted to talk about past experiences and adept at placing those experiences in coherent sequences. Indeed, humans are so good at making sense of social processes after the fact by means of standard stories that skilled interviewers must spend much of their energy probing, checking, looking for discrepancies, and then reconstructing the accounts their respondents offer them.

In teaching sociology to North American and European students, I have been impressed by the ingenuity and persistence with which they pack explanations into standard stories. Whatever else we have learned about inequality, for example, sociologists have made clear that a great deal of social inequality results from indirect, unintended, collective, and environmentally mediated effects that fit very badly into standard stories. Yet, students discussing inequality tend to offer two competing variants on the same standard story: (1) that individuals or categories of individuals who differ significantly in ability and motivation arrive at various tests, judged by others, on which they perform with differential success, whereupon those others reward them unequally, or (2) that powerful gatekeepers follow their own preferences in sorting individuals or whole categories of individuals who arrive at certain choice points, thereby allocating them differential rewards.

Both variants respect the rules of standard stories—self-motivated actors in delimited time and space and conscious actions that cause most or all of the significant effects. Such a standard story shapes likely disagreements—over which variant is more accurate, over whether and why categories of people do differ significantly in ability and motivation, over whether existing performance tests measure capacities properly, over whether gatekeepers operate out of prejudice, and so on. Although many people in and out of sociology explain inequality in these

either variant of the story omits or conceals major inequality-generating causal sequences well established by sociological research. Such a story conflicts, for example, with the explanation in which inequality at work forms the byproduct of hiring through existing, socially homogeneous personal networks of people already on the job, which happens to be the most common form of job recruitment through most of the contemporary capitalist world. That sort of confrontation between preferred standard stories and well-documented causal processes presents teachers and students of sociology with serious difficulties but also with great opportunities to rethink conventional explanations of social life. Later sections of this chapter examine the difficulties and opportunities in detail.

By no means does trouble with stories occur in pedagogy alone. It bedevils sociological analysis wherever that analysis takes place—in field observation, in historical reconstruction, in polling, on the editorial page, in everyday conversation, or in classrooms. Even veteran analysts of incremental, interactive, indirect, unintended, collective, and environmentally mediated causal processes in social life—I include myself—easily slip into interpreting new social situations as if standard stories adequately represented their causal structures. Although when discussing what we can do about weaknesses of stories I describe one sort of teaching that concentrates on the construction of more adequate stories, I see no yawning gulf between teaching and research; sophistication and effectiveness in one promotes sophistication and effectiveness in the other. At a minimum, teachers and researchers must learn the pitfalls of assuming that standard stories adequately represent causes and effects as they unfold in social processes.

For specialized purposes, of course, people often offer other sorts of accounts than the ones

I have called standard stories. Novelists and poets occasionally write descriptions of humans who engage in inexplicable actions, respond to hidden forces, or experience all life as chaos. Patients reporting their medical histories commonly depart from standard stories to enumerate successions of mishaps. Religious and political doctrines often include great historical arcs that fulfill some powerful plan or immanent principle—progress, decline, destiny, or just retribution. A book titled *The Story of the Atom* may well include standard stories about Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr, but much of its account is likely to center on explications of physical principles. Standard stories stand out among all of the accounts we sometimes call stories by their combination of unified time and place, limited sets of self-motivated actors, and cause-and-effect relations centered on those actors' deliberated actions. Such stories predominate in everyday descriptions, explanations, and evaluations of human social behavior.

Why do standard stories occupy such central places in social life? I see two main possibilities that are not mutually exclusive. First, standard story structures might correspond closely to the ways in which human brains store, retrieve, and manipulate information about social processes. Brains seem to array objects, including social objects, in virtual spatial and temporal relations to each other; to assign objects attributes that are available as explanations of their behavior; and to assemble complex situations as interactions of self-motivated objects within delimited spaces and times. If so, then preference for standard story accounts and availability of storytelling as a wide-ranging social tool could spring from deep currents in the human organism.

Perhaps, however, brains and nervous systems do no more than accommodate storytelling as one of many possible ways of organizing social accounts. Perhaps people learn the struc-

ture of stories just as they learn maps of cities and melodies of favorite songs. In that case, we might reasonably expect different populations to vary in their emphases on storytelling and may well discover that Westerners acquired a preference for standard story packaging of social life through a long, distinctive history. Through that long history, we might find, people extended storytelling from an initial narrow invention to a wide range of applications.

Here, as always, the exact interplay between nature and nurture, between wired-in capacity and cultural immersion, and between genetic determination and historical transformation presents a great challenge to our long-term understanding and explanation of social life. But in the short run, we need only this conclusion: for whatever reasons, today's Westerners (and maybe all peoples) have a strong tendency to organize conversations about social processes in standard story form.

Disciplinary Stories

Each of the academic disciplines that concentrates on the explanation of some aspect of human behavior has made its own adjustment to the dominance of standard stories. Linguists, geographers, psychologists, historians, paleontologists, economists, anthropologists, political scientists, and sociologists all have characteristic ways of dealing with—or keeping their distance from—standard stories. Many historians, for example, insist that such stories accurately represent the causal structure of social life. They write their histories as tales of conscious, self-motivated actors. When they get to the large scales of wars, great transformations, and civilizations, however, historians split between those who refer to collective actors (e.g., classes, nations) in standard story form and those who resort to abstract causal forces such

as mentalities, cultures, technologies, and forms of power.

Psychologists take other approaches to stories. They divide among a dwindling number of storytelling analysts who continue to treat whole individuals as conscious acting entities and a variety of reductionists who trace observable human behavior to the operation of genes, neurons, hormones, and/or subconscious mental processes. Economists divide differently; many analysts of individual economic behavior adopt a highly stylized version of the standard story that centers on deliberate decision making within well-defined constraints, whereas analysts of macroeconomic processes introduce non-story-mediating mechanisms—impersonal markets, technologies, resource endowments, and flows of information, capital, goods, or labor. For all their differences in other regards, political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists maintain similar relations to standard stories. Within each of the three disciplines, some specialists conduct almost all of their analyses in standard story form, whereas others reject stories in favor of explanations based on non-story structures and processes such as markets, networks, self-sustaining cultures, physical environments, and evolutionary selection.

What place should stories occupy in sociology? In ordinary circumstances, well-told standard stories convey what is going on far more forcefully than do the mathematical equations, lists of concepts, statistical tables, or schematic diagrams sociologists commonly chalk up on their blackboards. Why, then, should sociologists not turn to fiction and biography as models for their own efforts? After all, nonsociologists often reserve their highest praise for sociological work that “reads like a novel.” Would a course in story writing not, therefore, provide the best introduction to sociological analysis?

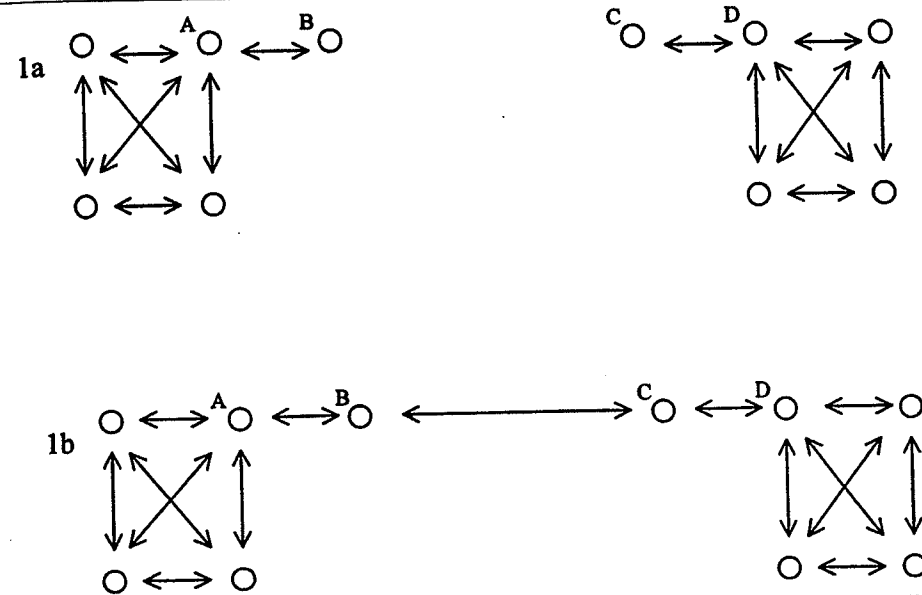


Figure 22.1. Changes in Centrality

No, it would not, at least not if the point of sociology is to describe and explain social processes. The difficulty lies in the logical structure of storytelling. Remember its elements: (1) limited number of interacting characters; (2) limited time and space; (3) independent, conscious, self-motivated actions; and (4) with the exception of externally generated accidents, all actions resulting from previous actions by the characters. Standard stories work that way, but on the whole social processes do not.

Consider some examples:

- Within a high-fertility population, as improved nutrition or prevention of children's diseases reduces infant mortality, the population grows more rapidly and experiences a rise in life expectancy.
- Job seekers who get their information about employment opportunities from other people who are already close to them do less well in the job market, on

average, than do job seekers who get their information from more distant acquaintances.

- Despite the sometimes sensational salaries of athletes, entertainers, and chief executive officers, the higher we go up the ladder of annual income in America, the larger looms inherited wealth and the smaller the share that wages of any type constitute current revenues.
- In Figure 22.1, 1a, B and C obviously occupy peripheral locations, whereas A and D hardly differ from their neighbors in centrality. In Figure 22.1, 1b, however, the addition of a connection between B and C has made them much more central than any of their predecessors, whereas A and D also have gained in their access to others.
- In American cities, children from low-income households often live in run-down, crowded housing where dust

mites and cockroaches proliferate. Those pests trigger asthma attacks, which keep poorer children out of school or hamper their performance in school.

Each of these cases calls for qualifications and explanations. The rise in life expectancy as a consequence of declining infant mortality registers the passage of larger surviving cohorts into higher age groups and soon reaches a limit unless death rates start declining for those higher age groups as well. More distant acquaintances provide relatively effective news about available jobs not because individually they have better information but because collectively they connect job seekers with a wider range of opportunities than do close friends and kin. Inherited wealth actually places the bulk of rich Americans in their high positions and means that much of their income arrives as returns from capital rather than as salaries. Connecting apparently peripheral locations that possess complementary resources describes the work of effective entrepreneurs, brokers, and matchmakers; it frequently changes whole organizational configurations rapidly. Missing school and being sick in school not only reduce children's exposure to education but also promote children's confusion, inattention, and discouragement, which further damages learning.

The point of these obvious examples is twofold. In each case, strong, recurrent causal mechanisms are operating, but in none of them do the crucial causal mechanisms correspond to the structure of standard storytelling. Of course, we can tell standard stories about some aspects in each of these situations—how microbe hunters track down baby-killing diseases, how individual job seekers actually find employment, why parents bequeath wealth to their children, under what circumstances entrepreneurs notice good fits between unconnected

locations, or how poor children experience schools. But these cases differ from the conventional matter of storytelling because central cause-and-effect relations are indirect, incremental, interactive, unintended, collective, mediated by the nonhuman environment rather than being direct, willed consequences of individual actions. The standard stories we construct for such processes miss their central causal connections. Most significant social processes fall into a nonstory mode. Most of them do so because at least some crucial causes with them are indirect, incremental, interactive, unintended, collective, and/or mediated by the nonhuman environment.

Personally, I have nothing against standard stories. I read them eagerly, make arguments with them, remember things by telling myself stories, and gladly overhear stories people tell each other on the subway. I began this chapter with a standard story about Leacock. As a student of social processes, I have spent much of my career locating, transcribing, cataloging, analyzing, retelling, and pondering other people's standard stories. The pages of my books on popular contention overflow with stories in which ordinary people make collective claims. That massive effort to extract evidence concerning social processes from stories has brought me to appreciate the centrality of storytelling in human life, but it also has taught me the incompatibility in causal structure between most standard stories and social processes.

The Search for Causes

Refusal to recognize the limits of standard storytelling creates major problems for social analysts. In one light, the problems stem from distortion produced by forcing social processes into stories about self-motivated actors. In the opposite light, they consist of failures to specify causal mechanisms that actually drive social

To clarify what is at issue in the distinction between standard storytelling and social science explanation, we can use the distinction among the four dominant methodological and explanatory strategies adopted by social scientists: methodological individualism, phenomenological individualism, system realism, and relational realism. Let us begin with methodological individualism and their connections with storytelling.

Methodological individualism treats independent choice-making persons as the fundamental units and starting points of sociological analysis. Its explanations pivot on mental events—choices or decisions. People make choices that forward their interests, preferences, or utilities within constraints set by personal resources and environmental settings. What causes those choices? Other mental events in the form of calculations concerning the likely outcomes of different actions.

Methodological individualism has the great advantages of simplicity and generality—it and when it works. For the moment, it faces three large difficulties, two of them upstream and one of them downstream. Upstream (i.e., before the point of decision that constitutes its central object of explanation), (1) few actual human behaviors seem to fit its requirement of optimizing choices among well-defined alternatives and (2) supposedly fixed elements such as preferences and computations of outcomes actually wobble and interact in the course of social action. Downstream (i.e., once a decision supposedly is made), we confront difficulty in that (3) methodological individualism so far lacks a plausible account of the causal chains by which decisions produce their effects on individual action, social interaction, and complex social processes.

Methodological individualists, however, can take standard storytelling in their stride. They already are talking about self-motivated

actors—the fewer, the better—within delimited times and places whose deliberated decisions produce all the effects worth mentioning. Their problem results not from intrinsic incompatibility of their causal accounts with storytelling but rather from the implausibility of the standard stories their causal accounts entail.

Phenomenological individualists, likewise, move easily on standard story terrain. They center descriptions and explanations of social processes on human consciousness. At the extreme of solipsism, indeed, the social world dissolves into individual consciousness, and systematic explanation of social processes faces an insuperable barrier—the impossibility of any observer's entering into his or her neighbor's awareness, much less explaining it. In less extreme forms, however, phenomenological individualists pursue a familiar variety of explanation. Through empathy, deduction, criticism, or some other means, they reconstruct the meanings, feelings, ideologies, and theories that presumably motivate social action. They can deal more easily than methodological individualists with collective actors such as churches, states, classes, or regions, to which they impute varieties and degrees of shared consciousness. At that point, nevertheless, phenomenological individualists confront the same explanatory obstacles as do methodological individualists—upstream, accounting for change and interaction of the conscious states that presumably produce social action; downstream, showing how those conscious states create their effects.

System realists have commonly prided themselves on escaping precisely those obstacles by recognizing the interdependence of individual actions, their constraint by previously existing social structure, and their coalescence into self-regulating systems. Structures sketched by system realists range in scale from friendships to civilizations, in content from fluid communications to evolutionary univer-

sals, and in structure from gossamer webs to iron cages. What unifies system approaches is their imputation of self-generating properties to social aggregates and their explanation of particular social events by connections to the larger social systems within which they occur. The great failures of systems theories lie in two main areas: (1) the absence of sturdy, well-documented causal mechanisms that actually are observable in operation and (2) the prevalence of poorly explicated functional explanations in which events, relations, institutions, or social processes exist because they serve some requirement of the system as a whole. Although they certainly describe their major actors—social systems—as self-propelling and sometimes describe social systems as having characteristic life histories, system realists usually avoid standard storytelling.

Relational analysis focuses on the transaction, interaction, information flow, exchange, mutual influence, or social tie as its elementary unit. For relational realists, individuals, groups, and social systems are contingent, changing social products of interaction. Relational realists vary greatly in the prominence they ascribe to culture—to shared understandings and their representations. At one extreme, hard-nosed network theorists treat the geometry of connections as having a logic that operates quite independently of the network's symbolic content. At the other extreme, conversational analysts treat the back-and-forth of social speech as inescapably drenched with meaning. In between, students of organizational processes who reject the idea that organizations are self-maintaining systems often trace webs of culturally conditioned interdependency among persons and positions within the organization.

At both extremes and in between, relational analysis maintains a curious connection with storytelling. It simultaneously denies the

self-propulsion of a story's characters and affirms the centrality of mutual influences among characters that give standard storytelling its continuity. Relational analyses enjoy the advantages of providing excellent descriptive templates for social processes and of identifying robust regularities in social interaction. At least in principle, they offer the promise of treating standard stories not as descriptions or explanations of social processes but as changing, contingent *products* of social interaction. In fact, they could account for the production and use of nonstandard stories as well.

To be sure, in real life and in sociology, most attempts at explanation of social processes involve syntheses, amalgams, and compromises among some or all of our four basic approaches: methodological individualism, phenomenological individualism, system realism, and relational analysis. It is not hard, for example, to conceive of individuals as making rational choices within strict limits set by encompassing and self-regulating social systems, as in the model of a buyer or seller who enters a competitive market. Similarly, relational analysts often go on to argue that the structures created by interaction—hierarchies, paired categories, industries, and so on—have emergent properties, operate according to powerful laws, and shape social relations among their participants; to that extent, relational realists edge toward systems theories. Still, each of the four explanatory traditions generates some relatively pure and exclusive accounts of social life, each (even in compromised form) presents characteristically different difficulties, and at the limit all four cannot be valid. Furthermore, none of the four offers an explanatory structure that fits comfortably with the standard stories in which people ordinarily cast their social accounts.

In most circumstances, standard storytelling provides an execrable guide to social explanation. Its directly connected and self-

motivated actors, deliberated actions, circumscribed fields of action, and limited inventory of causes badly represent the ontology and causal structure of most social processes. There are exceptions; some games, some battles, some markets, and some decision making within formal organizations approximate the ontology and causal structure of standard stories. But these are extreme cases, notable especially for the hidden institutional supports that make them possible. Most social processes involve cause-and-effect relations that are indirect, incremental, interactive, unintended, collective, and/or mediated by the nonhuman environment.

How to Confront Storytelling

Hence, a three-faced problem: how to cut through the limits set by prevalent stories on the explanation of social processes, how to convey valid explanations of social processes when audiences customarily wrap their own explanations in storytelling, and how to describe and explain the creation, transformation, and effects of existing standard stories.

The first is, surprisingly, the easiest. All well-versed practitioners of methodological individualism, phenomenological individualism, system realism, and relational analysis have at times learned to resist standard story interpretations of their subject matter and to adopt formalisms that assist them in imposing an alternative frame—mathematical models, diagrams, simulations, conceptual schemes, measurement devices, and more. It might be painful, and some skilled practitioners abandon their training, but such learned self-discipline comes with apprenticeship to the trade.

Communication with nonspecialists who customarily cast their social accounts in standard stories sets a greater challenge. Teachers of

mathematics' or chemistry's emphatically non-story structures to novices have several advantages over sociologists; almost no one thinks mathematics or chemistry should or does follow the rules of storytelling, students have no previous training in mathematics or chemistry as a series of stories to shed before they can learn more adequate models, and students grudgingly or eagerly accept that learning the formal structure of mathematics or chemistry will give them future benefits. None of these, regrettably, applies to sociology.

On the contrary. Most people, including some teachers of sociology, think that social life actually does conform to the requirements of storytelling—self-motivated actors, deliberated actions, and the lot. In addition, people (or at least Western people) ordinarily carry on their moral reasoning in a standard story mode. They judge actual or possible actions by their conscious motives and their immediately foreseeable effects; this fact lies behind the frequent complaint that sociological explanations deny the responsibility, autonomy, and/or moral worth of individuals. In addition, people ordinarily join (1) moral judgments, (2) conceptions of what is possible, (3) ideas of what is desirable within that realm of possibility, and (4) causal accounts of social life. A discussion of what people should do presumes that they can do it, and the justification for their doing so usually includes judgments about the likely consequences of their doing so. As a result, people do not readily accept analysts' attempts to pry elements of moral thinking apart. (Perhaps for that very reason, young people who are beginning to question the moral systems within which they grew up develop greater receptivity to sociology than do their fellows.)

That is not all. Before they encounter sociology as a discipline, students and nonspecialist readers have had years of practice in construct-

ing social explanations by means of storytelling; they do not cast off that practice easily. Finally, the benefits of doing so are much harder to discern than in the case of mathematics or chemistry; indeed, what most students and some professionals hope to find in sociology is the ability to construct more persuasive standard stories. Sociologists do not easily cut through the veil of resistance.

What can sociologists do about it? Here are some of the possibilities:

- Study the social processes that condition how and why similar stories strike one audience as quite authentic and strike another as utterly phony
- Teach competing ways of representing particular social processes, not only as storytelling and as alternative social scientific models but also as metaphor, machine, and political rhetoric; compare premises, procedures, and results of these competing representations, showing what is distinctive and valuable about the social scientific ones
- Dramatize the existence of social processes, configurations, or outcomes for which available standard stories offer implausible explanations, demonstrably false explanations, contradictory explanations, or no explanations at all and for which coherent sociological explanations exist
- More precisely and aggressively, create and use simulations of social processes (whether simple games or complex symbolic representations) that challenge available standard stories, embody sociologically plausible causes and effects, produce empirically verifiable outcomes, and allow participants to investigate the consequences of altering inputs or causal structures

- Trace standard story shadows of non-story processes, as by following a series of interdependent life histories, each itself in coherent standard story form, before examining the intersection and variation of those lives; how, for example, do variable relations to the same school system, firm, or labor market create contrasting trajectories and solidarities?
- Go even farther in the same direction and subvert storytelling; embed non-story explanations in ostensibly storytelling form, for example, by recounting the same social process—a military battle, flow of information through a hospital, or racial integration of a school system—from multiple perspectives, one standard story per participant, until the problem shifts to accounting for differences and connections among the experiences of participants
- Observe how the relationship and conversation between interviewer and respondent shape the responses that survey analysts later interpret as evidence of respondents' individual traits, preferences, intentions, and/or propensities
- Simulate and investigate what happens when participants in standard stories become aware of and respond deliberately to cause-and-effect relations that are indirect, incremental, interactive, unintended, collective, and/or mediated by the nonhuman environment, thus approximating what many theorists have advocated as "reflexive" sociology
- Tunnel under standard stories themselves by creating compelling explanations for both (1) the stories that participants in social processes tell about what is happening to them or others and (2) the stories that analysts, critics, ob-

servers, and even other sociologists tell about particular social processes, situations, and outcomes; using systematic knowledge of the social processes involved, for example, explain how and why police, criminals, judges, prosecutors, priests, social workers, and criminologists come to tell different stories about crime

From the last alternative unfolds a huge, promising program of sociological work. Analysts of social construction have generally contented themselves with demonstrating that entities that earlier interpreters have taken to be irreducibly real—identities, nations, states, genders, and more—consist of or depend on elaborate, contingent, but compelling cultural webs. They have not offered verifiable descriptions or explanations of the processes by which the relevant social construction takes place. They have taken social construction to be a blank wall, an opaque screen, or an impenetrable thicket, impossible to tunnel under. Because standard stories constitute one of the major zones of social construction, however, any systematic account of the processes by which people generate, transform, respond to, and deploy standard stories will serve as a model for tunneling under constructionist analyses in general, taking them seriously but identifying the social constructions involved as objects of explanation.

Here is a challenge to social science worthy of a lifetime's effort. To explain how, why, and with what effects people fashion standard stories will require a commodious, sophisticated theory. It will entail mapping the various contents, forms, and contexts of stories; tracing how they change; pinpointing the social work people do with them; and saying how some of them become fixed in laws, national traditions, or religious rituals, others form and flow like

jazz, and still others circulate as jokes, insults, potted biographies, excuses, moral pronouncements, and ad hoc explanations. Surely, hermeneutic and text-analytic methods will not suffice; attention will shift to the social processes that precipitate standard stories. We should enjoy the irony that a major obstacle to social explanation should become the object of social explanation.

We have some models for that sort of analysis. In the study of language, of art forms, of well-articulated ideologies, of contentious repertoires, of kinship systems, and of other phenomena where change in shared understandings clearly occurs and significantly affects participants' interactions, sociologists and other social scientists already have accumulated experience in tunneling under social construction. Not that they have reached high consensus or manufactured models that will easily export to the explanation of standard stories or other equally complex phenomena. However we evaluate the models currently available in these fields, their existence establishes the possibility in principle of taking the prevalence, variety, and power of standard stories as an explanatory challenge.

An even greater challenge lies farther along the same road. Sociologists eventually must reconcile three apparently contradictory features of social life:

- The recurrence of a limited set of causal mechanisms in a wide variety of situations
- The incessant improvisation that occurs in social interaction
- The great weight of particular histories, congealed as particular cultural configurations, on social interaction.

Each is so compelling that it has acquired its own advocates—advocates of general covering

laws for human behavior, advocates of social life as nothing but piecemeal improvisation, and advocates of deep historical and cultural determinism cum particularism. In fact, all three operate and interact. The three features combine in producing path-dependent social processes that never quite repeat themselves, ceaseless flux in relations among participants, and strong but partial causal analogies from one iteration of a social process to the next.

We see the trio in the field of inequality, where similar processes of exploitation, resistance, and control recur in disparate circumstances, yet actual participants in any one of those circumstances negotiate, innovate, cheat, resist, and adapt without cessation, and all this improvisation occurs within strong limits, particular to the time and place, set by accumulated culture, so much so that within the same setting inequalities by gender, race, and citizenship operate as if they belonged to distinct idioms within a common language. We see the trio again in contentious politics, where an analyst of mobilization notices similar causal connections in a vast array of situations, where on the ground improvisation is not only prevalent but also essential, and where the forms of interaction themselves occur within or at the perimeters of previously established forms.

Although the production of standard stories surely conforms to causal principles and permits variation in storytelling style, storytelling lodges especially in the third category, in the social arrangements by which the accumulated collective past weighs on the present and the future. Social interaction generates stories that justify and facilitate further social interaction, but it does so within limits set by the stories people already share as a consequence of previous interactions. It would be a triumph of social analysis to tell the true story of how storytelling arises and how it affects our conduct of social life.

Enlightenment and Explanation

The prevalence of standard stories poses two significant problems for teachers and students of sociology. First, both teachers and students make choices, implicit and explicit, between conceiving of sociology as enlightenment or science, but for most people the paths to enlightenment pass through standard stories, substituting one standard story for another rather than complementing standard stories by means of science. Second, the actual causal structure of social processes, the indispensable core of any sociological explanation, usually contradicts the logical and causal structure of standard stories. As a consequence, teachers of sociology choose, however unconsciously, how to connect their presentation of the subject with standard stories.

Figure 22.2 schematizes the choice. At one extreme, teachers can emphasize sociology as enlightenment by formulating and telling superior stories. In what way superior? From a sociological viewpoint, superior stories have these qualities:

- They include all the major actors (including collective and nonhuman actors) that a valid causal account of the events in question would identify and relate.
- Within the social interactions they describe, they accurately represent cause-and-effect relations among actions of participants in the story, even if they neglect indirect, incremental, and other effects that are not visible in the participants' interactions.
- They provide effective means of connecting the story with times, places, actors, and actions outside its purview.
- They offer means of relating causes explicitly invoked by the story with other causes that are indirect, incremental,

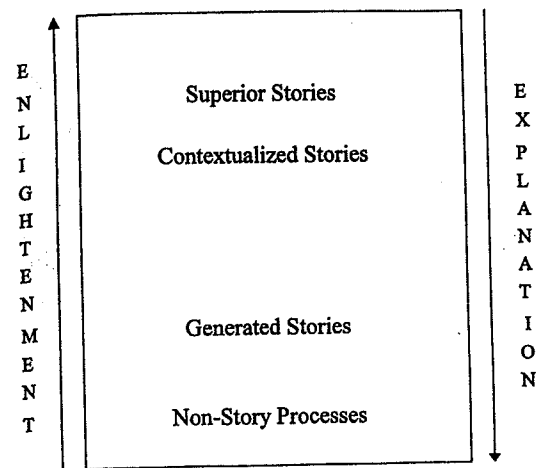


Figure 22.2. Ways of Presenting and Pursuing Sociology

interactive, unintended, collective, and/or mediated by the nonhuman environment.

Superior stories, that is, do not identify all the relevant cause-and-effect relations, but they remain consistent with fuller, more adequate causal accounts.

In the case of social movements, for example, an *inferior* but commonly credited story says that people who have failed in fair, normal competition vent their frustration in collective complaints, to which right-thinking people respond by pointing to established channels for the expression of political preferences. The story is inferior because solid evidence concerning social movement recruitment and participation regularly contradicts its empirical implications and because the causal connections it alleges—notably the chain from failure, to frustration, to collective action—do not hold up to close observation.

A *superior*, sociologically validated story says that people join social movements as a

consequence of their relations with other people who have already experienced injustice or otherwise become aware of fellow humans' experience with injustice. Neither story adequately represents the significance of network connections in recruitment to social movements, but within the social interactions it does represent, the second story comes much closer to social processes actually governing social movement activism. Thus, the superior story makes a contribution to the teaching of sociology as enlightenment.

At the other extreme, nonstory processes, we can decide to teach, learn, and use sociology as a deliberate integration of social interaction into causal chains, significant parts of which are indirect, incremental, interactive, unintended, collective, and/or mediated by the nonhuman environment. Thus, we can construct, verify, and communicate models of social movements in which intentions, awareness, and deliberated action take place in tight interdependence with social processes that are not immediately visible to social movement participants. This sort of teaching, learning, and using is essential to the discovery of new explanations and the full criticism of prevalent stories and, hence, is crucial to the education of professional sociologists. It is essential because cause-and-effect relations within social processes do not, in fact, conform to standard stories.

In between the two extremes, we also can choose to pursue sociology as an effort to contextualize existing stories or to generate them. *Contextualizing* stories involves identifying the social situations in which certain types of stories arise and tracing the consequences of adopting those stories rather than others that are, in principle, available. Thus, we might analyze the conditions under which a connected but previously unmobilized population forms a story about its distinctive national origins, makes claims for political recognition on the basis of

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that story, and then lives the consequences of having adopted that particular story rather than some other that may have been available.

The even more ambitious program of *generating* stories consists of analyzing the processes by which people actually create, adopt, negotiate, and alter the stories they employ in routine social life. Here, in principle, the analyst should be able to simulate and predict both form and content of stories as they enter the social interactions of juries, social movement activists, newscasters, coworkers, and people in general. Storytelling is such a fundamental, pervasive social process that it is hard to imagine effective generation of stories without deep understanding of nonstory processes. Thus, each rung in the ladder from explanation to enlightenment depends on those below it; construction of superior stories rests on some ability to contextualize them, contextualization requires some awareness of processes that generate stories, and the analysis of generation requires partial knowledge of the nonstory causal processes at work in social life.

To teach superior stories and the capacity to detect and criticize inferior stories, however, amply serves enlightenment. Sociology as enlightenment can profitably concentrate on criti-

cal examination and reconstruction of widely employed standard stories. Because most students of sociology go off into other walks of life, and because nearly all of them continue to conduct their lives by means of stories and responses to other people's stories, sociology as enlightenment should enrich and clarify social experience. An enlightenment-oriented sociological education can equip those nonspecialist citizens to identify, compare, classify, criticize, improve, or even deploy standard stories. On the presumption that knowing how powerful everyday processes actually work prepares the knowers for more effective encounters with social life, sociological teaching can serve well by concentrating on standard stories. If that sort of education then sensitizes nonspecialists to indirect, incremental, interactive, unintended, collective, and/or environmentally mediated causal links to the stories people tell, then so much the better.

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As we move into the 21st century and attempt, in some measure, to unlearn the 20th century, the expanding global knowledge produced by the interconnectedness of the world system certainly challenges essentialist thinking. Curricula are being "internationalized" and "culturalized." The garnering academic support for "multiculturalism" unquestionably promotes the addition of non-Western courses or course content across the curriculum, implying deletions or adjustments to traditional Western knowledge. Supporters of the "Western" approach to education view these changes as threats to the very foundations of the social arrangement between the middle class and universities. Viewed within the context of societal changes and related university changes, their informal social connections reflect the tensions, conflicts, and negotiations that are laying the foundations for the new formulations in anthropological teaching imaginations in the 21st century.

The current debate over the place of cultural diversity in higher education goes beyond the narrow parameters of political correctness to questioning definitions of knowledge, authority in knowledge transfer, and the basis

for knowledge creation. The core issue involves *who* produces, reproduces, and transforms the canon. At stake in this debate are (1) the authority of the people who write books about their (and other) ethnic/racial groups; (2) the power of those who select the teaching faculty in universities; (3) the authority of faculty, departments, administrators, and cultural groups in the university to define the boundaries and content of what is taught about cultural diversity; and (4) the nature of linkages among departments that teach about other cultures. The key issues for all the stakeholders involve the relationship between the West and "the rest" within society and within academia and the power relationships among departments that teach about human diversity—the very core of the anthropological imagination. Anthropology's traditional knowledge system is, and always has been, controversial. Indeed, several of the key anthropological concepts are at the heart of the "culture wars." Weiner (1992) argues that anthropology has much to offer to advance the multicultural debate. Its history, theoretical framework, and objectivity make it difficult for anthropologists to legitimately take extreme positions on either side of the debate,