


Chapter 1

“All the World’s a Stage” and Sociologists Its Storytellers: Contemporary Sociology and the Art of Telling a Good Story

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ABSTRACT

Sociologists have become “storytellers.” This chapter aims to explore the importance of writing in the ways of telling about society. Departing from two iconic books – The Sociological Imagination (Mills, 1959) and Storytelling Sociology (Berger and Quinney, 2004), issues related to “words,” “voice,” and “audience” emerge as key elements of the story writing/storytelling sociology craft’s toolbox. At present, the pressures imposed by fast science and writing in highly competitive teaching and research environments, the growing technological development applied to research, and the expansion of hyper and social media represent new challenges for storytelling sociology. At the end, the chapter argues for the enduring importance of writing in the ways of telling about society, while recognizing the value of time in research: time to listen, write, and tell.

INTRODUCTION

All the world’s a stage,

And all the men and women merely players;

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6605-3.ch001

William Shakespeare (As You Like It, 1623)

It is not by chance that Jaques’ words in William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* are so often quoted, nor is it a coincidence that in a scientific article focusing on sociology, Shakespeare’s words are an inspirational motto. As a matter of fact, literature was at the basis of the changes leading to the so called “narrative turn” (Hyvärinen, 2016), which could explain the current interest in storytelling and story-related concepts.

In recent years, there has been an amazing range of initiatives under the umbrella of “storytelling”. Informed mainly by media communication, marketing and branding fields, the word is all around us, crossing disciplines, professions and practices. Small and large companies, travelers and tourists, Chefs and artists, “vulnerable” and “successful” people, but also politicians, policymakers and scientists, many use stories and related metaphors. Sociology is no exception from this trend. As Berger and Quinney (2004) advocate, professional storytellers have become more visible and “sociologists have become storytellers” (p. 8).

In a 1984 *New York Times*’ article titled “Why Scholars Become Storytellers”, Frederika Randall noted an increasing interest of scholars working in the social sciences, namely anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and historians, in an expanding literary dimension. By that time, it was said that “the enthusiasm for a literary model of social inquiry is less evident among sociologists and psychologists than it is among historians and anthropologists” (Randall, 1984, §13). However, recently, such an interest has become more and more visible. At the beginning of 2019, “Storytelling: Sociological Methods, Motives, and Mantras” was the title of the Annual Meeting of the North Central Sociological Association, held on March 29 & 30, Hyatt Regency, Cincinnati, OH. The program heralded that “A consistent theme throughout the program is the power of stories” (NCSA, 2019, p. 4). What is, after all, the power of stories and storytelling?

Across different fields, stories offer a way of presenting and understanding the complexity of social life while using familiar conventions. A story “is a form of knowledge that is readily retained and recalled” and it “goes beyond the medium in which it is delivered, recognisable in written, spoken, sung, acted, danced and pictorial representations” (Bradby, 2017, p. 8). Using macro-structures with beginnings, middles, and ends, and micro-structures entailing specific characters, scenarios and plots, stories include a universal language, which is easily recognised and reproduced (Polletta, Chen, Gardner & Motes, 2011). Stories somehow “assign order where there seems to be chaos and confusion” (Erasga, 2010, p. 22). Through stories, what seems to be a personal daily experience is perceived as a social problem or it allows exercising the sociological imagination, i.e., understanding “the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals” (Mills, 1959, p. 5). The relationship between storytelling and the sociological imagination is obvious and has already been recognized by authors working in related fields. According to Erasga, “[s]ociological imagination is an open invitation to theorize via the stories we tell ourselves and others” (Erasga, 2010, p. 21). Bradby (2017) says that “[t]aking story seriously as a method and a medium for representing aspects of human experience in social context responds to the call to exercise sociological imagination (Mills, 1959)” (p. 14).

In 2009, Ronald Berger and Richard Quinney edited *Storytelling Sociology* (2004). Separated by almost 50 years, these two books are closer than apart. While Mills dedicates important pages to writing, Berger and Quinney focus on the power of telling stories. Both books may make one think about the inextricable relations between writing and telling in sociology. According to the International Sociological Association’s (ISA) Code of Ethics, “sociologists work to develop a reliable and valid body of scientific knowledge based on research” (ISA, 2001) and the use of storytelling, besides being “a fashionable

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