

Narrative and Social Science

A Response to Gregory Reck

by
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Abstract: While his appeal for open narratives arising from dialogic encounters between scientist and subject has much to commend it, Reck appears to be abandoning the search for causal explanation and useful generalization. Further, neither mathematical models nor abstract categories are in themselves dangerous. Much depends on how data so collected and organized is applied. In any case, both quantitative work and abstract analysis help protect the scientist from bias and imprecision. In the minds of powerful grant-awarders, narrative accounts are merely preparatory to what is “real”—i.e., statistical presentation. Thus, despite its many detractors, positivism remains powerful and widespread. Reck’s enthusiasm for ethnologies that qualify as creative art overlooks the fact that social science’s quest for systematic comprehension means that it cannot be a literary enterprise. Reck (and Jones) do not take seriously enough problems of falsifiability. When narratives compete with one another, what criteria or procedures allow us to test them? Narrativists complain about the aridity of technical social science, yet they themselves seem about to produce another inaccessible theoretical literature.

A. Reservations about narrative approaches and the critique of positivism

A number of Greg Reck’s points need to be commented upon. After doing so, I offer some broad perspectives about narrative analysis in the social sciences and in sociology in particular. I shall also respond to some of Greg Jones’s theses. The length of my comments is a reflection of the quality of the two scholarly presentations that inspired them. In an effort to advance the discourse about narrative analysis, as well as to find answers to my own questions, I will be intentionally dialectical or provocative.

Greg Reck wrote that:

... [W]hat is at stake in the issue of narrative is the degree to which narrative analysis and writing strike at the very heart of what social science has done in representing human life: transformed passionate life into lifeless data; turned the existential dialogic of the ethnographic enterprise into a positivistic monologue; and in the process contributed to the self-fulfilling prophecies of civilization that life is abstract, that self and others are objects, and the world is an efficient equation.

I would argue that whatever means are used to derive knowledge about the social world, it is the application of the data we gather that humanizes the social scientific enterprise. To deny the value of scientific positivism in sociology for understanding human interaction is to deny the possibility of finding underlying causes of such interaction. What distinguishes sociology as a social science is the search for an understanding of why we have recurrent rules, roles, and relationships in social life. To be able to understand such things, we must rely on abstraction, for the main concepts and principles of sociology do not refer to concrete entities that we can see and touch, like the flesh of individual human beings.

Mathematical and statistical representations of basic dimensions, structures, and processes of human interaction do not necessarily dehumanize them. After all, even though these representations are created by and refer to human beings—and we should never forget this—they are not the same thing as individual human beings. Such representations provide us with a clearer and more precise means of understanding. I am reminded here of the clarity and precision of the equations of Newton cited earlier by Professor Mackey or the powerful parsimony of Einstein’s relativity equation.

Of course, mathematics is not the only means to represent what we know about the social world. We can use words, but their variable interpretations often confuse or misrepresent what we mean to say. Thus, the meta-interpretation of narrative writing by narrative analysis may give us an illusion of understanding as it uses evocative human language to provide an inadequate or invalid or otherwise inappropriate representation of the nature of social relations. Of course, we can argue about how best to

represent the structure or meaning of social relations and whether we would be more fruitfully directed toward structure or meaning.

Reck has asserted that: “What is necessary for experimental ethnographies to stand as authentic, unapologetic alternatives [to the traditional ethnographic genre] is for them to be presented as the direct and primary product of fieldwork.” I have done what sociologists would call “qualitative research.” I suspect it does not qualify as “experimental ethnography” in Greg Reek’s perspective. What is significant, though, is that some social science colleagues—including powerful grant panel reviewers—tend to see this kind of work as exploratory, or preparatory to the “real,” i.e., quantitative or statistical, research.

I would argue that qualitative studies and/or ethnographies are real research, not exploratory or supplemental, as positivists might argue. As a social scientist, I also must acknowledge, however, that such work may have limited value because from it we may gain fewer explanations or useful generalizations. From a social scientific perspective, legitimate questions can be raised about work in anthropology (and other ostensible social sciences) that disavows the usual premises of science. These questions concern both the goals being sought as well as the operative epistemological commitments. The fact that the premises of “normal science” remain preeminent in mainstream sociology today means that we cannot ignore such questions without risking being ignored ourselves in the mainstream.

In thinking about experimental narrative ethnography as an alternative to the traditional ethnographic genre in anthropology, I feel compelled to ask about its relationship to another, very different kind of alternative. In particular, I am interested in how Greg Reck might view recent work in quantitative anthropology that is tied to the growing interdisciplinary interest in social network analysis. Is this approach to be debased or dismissed because it is aligned with positivistic social science?

Other important questions about the goals of social science are raised by his arguments for narrative ethnography. For example, we can ask—in a philosophical as well as empirical vein—what we are capable of understanding about human interaction and culture. This places us in the domain of ontology (i.e., what we are studying) and methodology (i.e., how we can fruitfully proceed in the effort to understand what we can). These questions, in turn, raise questions of epistemology. Obviously, experimental ethnographers and positivistically-oriented structuralists see different possibilities for the social science enterprise because they define science differently in relation to their different purposes for their work.

Let me parenthetically note here the fine paper “On Narrative and Sociology” (*Social Forces*, Sept. 1989, vol. 68, no. 1) by John Shelton Reed. This was his Presidential Address to the Southern Sociological Society, and in it he criticized the dismal state of scholarly writing, especially in the social sciences. More to the point for our purposes, though, he argued for reconsidering the case for descriptive, interpretive work in sociology based on the narrative. He contrasted this “bottom-up” approach to sociology, focusing on context and particulars, with the more widely accepted positivistic “top-down” approach based on hypothesis-testing science. The latter emphasizes logic, mathematics, and computers and is supposed to lead to “good theory,” tight analysis, systematic argument, and empirical discovery guided by sound hypotheses and reasoning. The contrast drawn by Reed reflects not only a conception of different styles of sociological work, but also a conception of potentially very different goals and epistemologies.

Social scientists may approach their work in different discursive traditions, with positivists challenging the value or relevance of narrative approaches as legitimate social science. But in the end, the cogency of any approach and its conception of knowledge will depend on a successful discourse in the scientific community. Indeed, with no established paradigm, the advance of knowledge in sociology occurs through a continuing series of discursive battles between and among different theoretical perspectives, approaches, and lines of analysis {see, e.g., Jeffrey Alexander’s “The New Theoretical Movement” in Neil J. Smelser’s edited *Handbook of Sociology* [Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988]; Herbert Simons’s edited volume *Rhetoric in the Human Sciences* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989); and Donald McCloskey’s “Formalism in the Social Sciences, Rhetorically Speaking” in *The American Sociologist*, 1990, vol. 21}.

In criticizing positivism, its relative pre-eminence in contemporary sociology and other social sciences should not be forgotten. Positivism may be under attack and may seem to shake, but its appeal remains powerful and widespread. The growth of interest in alternative perspectives—interactionism, cultural studies, contextual analysis, discourse analysis, hermeneutics, qualitative analysis, humanism, ethnomethodology, critical and feminist analysis, historiography, figurational analysis—has added to the usual fragmentation of sociology. But positivism remains the most widely taught and followed epistemology in the major centers of the field.

What seems especially interesting in this context is the effort by theorists such as Anthony Giddens to try to understand—through structuration theory—the interplay of structure and action (or social constraint and human agency in interaction) and the larger society. By seeing individuals as active agents struggling with social constraints, such theories humanize their subjects, but social analysis is not reduced to strictly particularistic or psychologists terms. Notwithstanding the recent rhetorical arguments by McCloskey and (perhaps) proponents of narrative, I would argue that sociology is not a literary enterprise. I believe that we nevertheless are able—via systematic social science—to understand the basic dimensions and patterns of social life through a representation of a—or *the*—fundamental existential human struggle for freedom in the face of constraint.

I would like to address one more issue raised by Greg Reck’s paper. He asks whether narrative ethnographies are “more authentic representations of the human than the realist or naturalistic genre.” He responds by saying that narrative ethnographies

are distinguished by the ethnographer's special awareness of, and reflexive approach to, the use of narrative and by the resulting literary form that makes the meaning of the narrative open, enabling author and reader to interact.

Here one might usefully ask two questions: (1) Does the narrative ethnographer want or expect to achieve some sharing of understanding of the meaning of the narrated text? (2) Is a generally understood interpretation of the meaning of the narrative possible in most cases? The narrative ethnographer's work may reflect the complexities, contradictions, and nuances of human discourse, but when interpretation theoretically is always open, how are we to know at any given time *what we know*? Does it matter that this type of work may never afford us a consensual or authoritative interpretation? Do we strive for some notion of truth, albeit truth grounded in a particular context of understanding or a particular historical time? Or are we satisfied with evoking multiple interpretations, multiple meanings, multiple conceptions of reality? Is there not some legitimate basis for the authority of the positivist or social scientist expert over both subject and object, when the social scientist has reflexively taken into account the reactions of subjects to the interpretations of how they live, asserting what he or she knows on the basis of such an accounting?

It seems to me that the challenge is not, as Greg Reck suggests, to develop a dialogic language that escapes objectification. It is rather to find a methodology that enables us to describe and explain in a coherent and valid way, one that accurately reflects what the social scientist has found from systematic study and reflexive or dialogic interpretation. Through whatever process we choose, with whatever language, we social scientists are bound to have the last word. We structure our narratives and analyses; we choose which narratives or other aspects of experience of our subjects to convey; and we decide how to represent what we have heard, seen, or read.

B. General questions about narrative analysis with special reference to sociology

1. How do we know *how much* we know when relying on the narrative?
2. Are narratives falsifiable? If so, by what procedures and criteria? If not, why should we believe one narrative rather than another, competing one? If the credibility or validity of narratives is important, why could we not subject them to the methods of "normal" (i.e., positivistic) social science to determine their validity?
3. How can narrative sociologists sustain any kind of credible social analysis without turning to an epistemology that incorporates "public, objective facts" (Greg Jones's terminology) as means of knowing the social world? Even if one accepts the relativity of knowledge, within the discourse of a discipline there are claims made for the superiority of one's knowledge as public, objective facts. Surely within social science, narrative analysis will remain vulnerable and discreditable as an epistemology as long as it disavows any attempts to propose its narratives as forms of truth, reality, or fact.
4. Even if the world of reason oppresses us, must we conclude that reason provides an inadequate or inappropriate means of knowing and representing the world?
5. On what basis does a narrativist position enable us to argue that there is not a "neutral, God's eye standpoint" (Greg Jones's terminology) for representing knowledge or reality?
6. Does positivism have a future in sociology? It may indeed be facing the beginnings of an underground revolution—from "the narrative approach" or more likely, from assorted other postmodernists, critical theorists, cultural analysts, interactionists, ethnomethodologists, feminists, and others. But I am not prepared to write it off. Indeed, the rise of structural or social network analysis, rational choice theory, mathematical modeling, new forms of exchange theory, and a variety of other expressions of rationalism suggests that some interesting discursive battles for the hearts and minds of sociologists and other social scientists lie ahead.

The strategy of narrative proponents and other anti-positivists seems to be to dismiss positivistic approaches because they are associated with some sort of hegemony in science or society or because they are a vestige of a passing modern age. I am not convinced by such argumentation. Is it not possible to see the narrative in social science, like traditional ethnography in anthropology or sociology, as a means of representing a version of reality subject to the rational testing procedures of normal science? Narratives could be seen as potentially falsifiable hypotheses about reality, subject to systematic tests of reliability and validity of conventional social science methodology. (I recognize that matters of validity and reliability do not carry the same weight among postmodernists and proponents of the narrative as among positivists.)

A particular narrative interpretation of narrative data would be persuasive for most sociologists today to the extent that its construction adhered to established methodological and epistemological canons of normal science—i.e., positivism. It is not clear how those who reject these canons would decide among competing narrative interpretations as superior means of representing the world, especially when one (e.g., Greg Jones) acknowledges that people may "lie."

7. Even if one acknowledges that there is no non-narrative means of making sense of reality, it nevertheless seems to be the case that one could advance a narrative description of the findings of research that is based on a positivistic epistemology.
8. While power is not the only issue in understanding how scientists in a discipline decide what they know at any given time, it may be central. Answers to questions such as "Whose knowledge counts or is superior?" are shaped by the exercise of

power to assert and discredit. It appears that in sociology, proponents of narrative lack an arsenal of legitimized and credible epistemological and methodological tools that can persuade as effectively as those relying on the premises of normal science. Power then flows from the effective use of the epistemology or language of normal science.

The rejection of such epistemology or language would seem to put narrative proponents immediately on the defensive in contemporary discursive battles. The fact that positivists may see a place for the narrative—as qualitative data, for instance—while narrative proponents reject positivism out of hand, implies that the narrative proponents are “drawing a line in the sand” that could diminish their appeal of cogency for the so-far unaligned. Are we to rely exclusively on narratives to gain access to and understanding of the social world? Why do narratives give us better reasons for understanding the social world in the terms they present than other forms of data or styles of data presentation?

9. Why should we believe narratives, and what are the implications of believing or not-believing?
10. Students and colleagues sometimes complain to me about the inaccessibility of increasingly sophisticated or technical mathematical models and statistical analyses in sociology. Is the emerging metalanguage of narrative analysis—and related rhetorical, discursive, semiotic, linguistic, and cultural analyses—creating another inaccessible, and perhaps obfuscatory form of interpretation of the world?

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