**Narrative habitus: thinking through structure/agency in the narratives of offenders**

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Starting from the premise that experience is narratively constituted and actions are oriented through the self as the protagonist in an evolving story, narrative criminology investigates how narratives motivate and sustain offending. Reviewing narrative criminological research, this paper contends that narrative criminology tends toward a problematic dualism of structure and agency, locating agency in individual narrative creativity and constraint in structure and/or culture. This paper argues for a different conceptualisation of narrative as embodied, learned and generative, drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. Social action, which here includes storytelling, is structured via the habitus, which generates but does not determine social action. This theorisation understands structures and representations as existing in duality, according a more powerful role to storytelling. The paper concludes by discussion the implications of such a shift for narrative interventions toward offending.

**Key words:** narrative criminology; structure; agency; Bourdieu; offending.

**Introduction**

My life after childhood has two main stories: the story of the hustler and the story of the rapper, and the two overlap as much as they diverge… I lost people I loved, was betrayed by people I trusted, felt the breeze of bullets flying by my head. I saw crack addiction destroy families – it almost destroyed mine – but I sold it, too…. (Jay Z 2010: 16)

In *Decoded,* Jay Z weaves together a literary analysis of his lyrics and his biography. [[1]](#footnote-1) Drug dealing is a central theme in his oeuvre. *Decoded*, like his albums,is littered with apparent neutralisations, but this is only half of what he says. He describes the invention of the ‘hustler’ trope in rap, locating it in a particular historical and cultural moment: New York’s crack epidemic in the 1980s. The trope of the hustler is deeply personal (it’s his life story!), as well as common to a generation. Jay Z’s ‘hustler’ story reflects years spent on street corners; of being broke and rich again; it’s an enduring story that co-exists with his ‘new’ story as a rapper. Telling the story is not merely about loosening social ties to excuse his deviance, as neutralisation theory would suggest (Sykes and Matza 1968), but a deeper search for meaning and identity. Whereas neutralisations are highly strategic the narrative habitus conveys the way that narratives are natural and logical; the sense that the story could never have been otherwise. These characteristics of a narrative, its enduring nature, its connection to a life lived in a particular time and place, can be summed up in the notion of the *narrative habitus*.

Narrative criminology examines the complex narrative work undertaken by offenders (Presser 2009). Some of the best work pays close attention to the importance of social structure in shaping the narratives that motivate and sustain offending. Yet, scholarship has tended to rely on a dualistic conceptualisation of structure/agency. If narrative criminology is to adequately understand offending, it needs the conceptual tools to analyse how structure shapes narratives and human actions, through individuals’ perceptions and representations of themselves and their world. Clearly, individuals are neither cultural ‘dopes’, but nor do narratives exist in a social vacuum (Sandberg and Pedersen 2009; Fleetwood 2014). If narratives are constrained by social structure, how do limitations operate? This article proposes the notion of a narrative habitus[[2]](#footnote-2) for understanding how individuals’ narratives are both shaped by social structure as well as being creative and agentic.

The notion of the narrative habitus responds to critics who claim that narrative criminologists have focussed on individual creativity at the expense of the real world. Aspden and Hayward warn that privileging ‘speaking’ over ‘doing’ risks ‘turning the search for narrative themes into a meta-commentary’; attention to the real world is necessary if narrative criminology is to avoid descending into post-structural language games (2015: 240). Miller et al. note a tension between the apparently fluidity of narratives and the ‘historical weight’ of social structures, arguing that: ‘A primary limitation of a discursive treatment of such inequalities is that structure needs to be understood beyond that which is “constantly produced from moment to moment”’ (Miller et al. 2015: 92). Whilst narrative criminology perhaps inevitably brackets off objective social realities to focus closely on text, it has never insisted that narratives take primacy.

Narrative criminology can engage with the ‘real’ world whilst also maintaining its distinct focus on subjectivity and narrative, but doing so entails bridges troublesome dualisms: the ‘real world’ and subjective experiences; speaking and doing; material and symbolic; social structure and individual agency. Narrative criminology offers a causal explanation: that stories motivate offending. Narratives must therefore *precede* offending, otherwise they are mere post-hoc justifications. Since most narrative research is done through interviews, proving this is a logical impossibility (ethnography perhaps being the exception).[[3]](#footnote-3) Understanding narratives as rooted in social structure offers a way forward.

Firstly, I review narrative criminological research, demonstrating that research accounts for social structure, but nonetheless relies on a problematic conceptualisation of structure and agency. Next, I argue that that Bourdieu’s theory of social practice (and the habitus in particular) can account for structures and representations in duality, rather than in dualism; I then conclude with reflections on how the narrative habitus might inform interventions. This paper is driven by an over-arching concern: if narrative criminology is to offer critical perspectives on crime, it must have the tools for engaging with questions about the relationships between power, inequality and harmful behaviour.

**Narrative criminology**

A narrative is a personal story with a beginning, middle and end. Narrative is a fundamental, ontological condition of human existence (inter alia Bruner 1991, Ricoeur 1984, Holstein and Gubrium 2000). To quote Somers, ‘it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities’ (1994: 606). This post positivist understanding of narrative ‘blurs the distinction between narrative and experience by suggesting that experience is always known acted upon as it has been interpreted symbolically’ (Presser 2009: 184). In other words, narrative does not follow experience, but is intricately intertwined with it. Criminology comes relatively late to narrative, at least a decade after it joined the mainstream in sociology, psychology, history, philosophy, and even economics (Plummer, 1995; Gelsthorpe, 2007; Maruna 2015; Presser, forthcoming).

Rather than reading narratives as descriptions and records of events, narrative analysis asks *‘why was the story told that way?’,* prompting two lines of enquiry (Reissman 1993: 2). Firstly, how do social settings prompt particular narratives? Drawing on ethnomethodology, analysis examines the performance and interactional context of storytelling. The second line of enquiry considers the internal composition of narrative, asking what kinds of grammar and syntax the narrator uses; which discourses[[4]](#footnote-4) construct narratives (Reissman 1993). This approach recognises narratives as necessarily partial, the complex product of biography and the selective patching together of events, attuned to the particular moment of telling. Individual narratives are dynamic, on-going works-in-progress that construct a narrative self, or identity (Somers 1994, McNay 1999b). Narrative identity guides interpretations, and actions: we ‘make choices on the basis of a self that is conjured as the protagonist in an evolving story’ (Presser 2009: 184).

Focussing on the narratives of individual offenders does not entail pathologising, or uncritically adopting state definitions of crime. The notion of the ‘offender’ is broad, encompassing those who are criminalised, those who engage in deviant activities, and those who do harm but may not be labelled as criminals (Presser 2013). In fact, adopting a constitutive view of narrative leads to the post-postmodern claim that ‘crime is not so much caused as discursively constructed through human processes, of which it is one’ (Henry and Milovanovic cited by Presser and Sandberg 2015: 10). At the same time, embracing narrative need not mean departing from realist concerns with harm. Narrative criminology has, at heart, questions of aetiology, explaining the role of narrative in ‘instigating, sustaining and effecting desistance from harmful action and how they are used to make sense of harm’ (Presser and Sandberg 2015a: 1). Arguably, narrative criminology emerges at a key moment, drawing from post-structural scholarship on discourse but with much to add to contemporary, critical criminology oriented towards harm (Presser 2013) and the resurgence of realist/ultra-realist criminology (Matthews 2014; Hall and Winlow 2015).

**Agency and constraint in narrative criminology**

Narratives inhabit the juncture between individual and society: ‘stories thematize the points of connection between personal and collective stories, desire and effort. The point at which individual agency is reconfigured, phenomenologically, as group will, and vice versa, is limned in stories’ (Presser 2009: 178-9; also Polletta et al. 2011; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). The following review briefly traces how narrative criminology has typically accounted for social structure and agency. Social structure describes social forces that act powerfully on individuals (Parker 2000; Cheal 2005).[[5]](#footnote-5) Bourdieu’s notion includes material and symbolic structures: ‘There exist, within the social world itself and not only within symbolic systems (language, myths, etc.) objective structures independent of the consciousness and will of agents, which are capable of guiding and constraining their practices or representations.’ (1989: 14). It’s counterpart, agency, is similarly hard to define but is widely understood as ‘self-hood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom and creativity’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 962). This review argues that, although narrative criminologists draw from diverse theoretical perspectives, including narrative psychology, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, linguistic structuralism and post-modernism (Sandberg 2013: 71; Presser and Sandberg 2015a), all tend to locate agency in individual narrative creativity in opposition to external constraint, whether located in common linguistic narrative formats and conventions, culture, discourse or ideology.

*Narrative identity and agency*

Academic interest in narrative parallels the rise in personal storytelling and popular interest in Freudian self-help (Illouz 2008 in Polletta et al. 2011; 110; Plummer 1995). The proliferation of narratives in the twentieth century arguably responds to contemporary conditions of ontological insecurity, the loss of grand narratives, and a world in which identity is not settled, but a project (i.e. Giddens 1991; Young 2007). Whether this is something new is questionable. Nonetheless, storytelling is a ‘vital human strategy for sustaining agency in the face of disempowering circumstances’ (Jackson 2002: 14) fulfilling an existential need to be more than ‘bit players’ in our lives.

Researchers note the profound narrative crisis caused by incarceration and offending, against which the narrative reconstruction of the self helps ‘make sense’ (i.e. Maruna 2001; Maruna et al. 2006). Narrative, by nature, establishes a dialectic between past actions and present identity, which opens up space for reflection, agency and the creation of a ‘new’ identity. Following Maruna, criminologists have employed psychological and cognitive approaches to understand the narrative-identity work done after having done wrong (Stevens 2012; Toyoki and Brown 2014; Ugelvik 2012). Maruna finds that desisting narratives are ‘pleasant lies’ bearing little resemblance to actual events, thereby demonstrating a *lack* of connection between material social circumstance and the narratives told by offenders (2001). Also drawing on the notion of narrative identity, empirical research has examined how individuals employ narrative to construct a moral and/or coherent self in narratives that motivate and sustain harm. Hochstedlter et al. examine how violent offenders construct themselves as distinct from genuinely violent ‘others’ through characterising their victims as acceptable, by minimising their violence (2010). This work, done in and through narrative, is highly agential (see also Hochstetler et al. 2010; Copes et al. 2015, Brookman 2015).

In sum, research on how individuals use narratives to ‘make sense’ emphasises individuals’ capacity to construct a meaningful self through narrative, sometimes despite external realties. Furthermore, by understanding the self in psychological rather than social terms, narrative tends to be understood as a cognitive, internal process. Although researchers have considered how context, such as prison, shapes the kinds of narratives told, the role of social structure in conditioning narrative is under-examined.

*Culture makes available narrative formats*

Presser orients toward a more literary theorisation of narrative, examining the narrative devices employed by storytellers in constructing the narrative as *text* (Presser 2008, 2009). In *Been a heavy life,* she draws on Labov and Waletzky’s analytical approach to examine the narrative devices and construction (i.e. plot, characterisation, narrative devices etc.) employed by violent men (Presser 2008: 54-55). As well as examining how individuals narrate themselves as morally decent (for example through reform, or stability narratives), she found that violence offered a way to enact a particular kind of self-story: heroic struggle. This explicitly gendered plot/characterisation framed their lives as a struggle for respect despite mental illness, addiction, the criminal justice system, and others who had cheated, abused or disrespected them. Presser notes that this is a culturally available story particular to the West, thereby attending to the cultural and historical dimensions of narrative. Close analysis of stories as texts depends on a degree of analytic bracketing (Gubrium and Holstein 1998: 165). For example, Youngs and Canter combine classic literary theory (drawing on Frye) with psychology to identify four roles common to offenders’ narratives: the tragic hero, the victim, the revengeful mission and the professional (2012a, see also Youngs and Canter 2013). In using Frye’s abstract typology, they cut narrative adrift from historical and cultural moorings, and disregard social structural inequalities (see also Iannou et al. 2016). Such analytic bracketing can foreclose analysis of how stories relate to the objective structures that produce them.

In contrast, Brookman et al. (2011) show how the ‘code of the street’ guides responses to personal affronts through formula stories, i.e. disrespect deserves immediate violent reprisals. They note that the ‘code’ belongs to the street: it can only be credibly drawn upon by those in/of that milieu. They suggest that future research consider acculturation: suggesting that narrative formats have a social rather than psychological aetiology (2011). They also hint at a dialectical relationship between narrative and discourse, arguing that speaking the ‘code’ reproduces the code (2015: 22; see also Sandberg and Fleetwood, forthcoming).

Foucaultian approaches to narrative examine how social structure (and power) are reproduced through discourses, especially those pertaining to institutions (Presser and Sandberg 2015a). For example, Toyoki and Brown’s analysis of Finnish prisoners’ desistance narratives found that prison strongly structured narratives: ‘the identities prisoners claimed or aspired to were culturally sanctioned. Preferred versions of themselves were, arguably, a disciplinary mechanism which transformed them into self-disciplining subjects, indeed as objects that could be verbalized, judged and improved.’ (2014: 731). In contrast, Sandberg’s ethnography describes how street dealers in Oslo incorporated both oppression discourse (unemployment and racism) and gangster discourses (being hard, smart and criminally successful) in their self-narratives (2009). Both discourses reflect institutions – oppression discourses were learnt through interactions with the Norwegian welfare state; gangster discourse through growing up in the street, yet individuals switch between the two. This ‘interdiscursivity’ is creative and agential, but is constrained by material circumstances and capitals, since successful storytelling was dependent on the speaker’s position in the field and ‘street capital’ (2009; 2011).[[6]](#footnote-6) Considering capitals helps explain why individuals in the same field might construct different narratives. And interestingly, although Sandberg does not explicitly locate narrative in the habitus, he records that, because of the enduring nature of the gangster habitus, gangster discourse sometimes slipped into situations where it wasn’t warranted, such as job interviews (Sandberg and Pedersen 2009: 160).

Individuals draw on a wide variety of stories. Copes et al.’s research on violence in drug subcultures found that: ‘Stories to explain behaviours are not drawn from a single location (eg. conventional culture or street culture). Instead, people draw from numerous cultural locations when finding stories *they believe best fit their actions*’ (2015: 43). The problem of structural determinism common to cultural structuralism is avoided (Presser and Sandberg 2015a: 9), but individuals seem to be endowed with too much agency. Unless agency is understood as conditioned by social structure, the notion of a universal, rational/agentic narrator can emerge.

In literary approaches to narrative, culture makes available particular narrative formats: ‘participants cannot choose from an infinite pool of language and meaning. Instead they rely on ways of self-presenting and thinking that they have learned and used elsewhere.’ (Sandberg 2010: 455). The shared ‘pool’ of language includes everything from common vocabulary, plot, genre and available subject positions reflecting dominant discourse and ideology. In common is the notion that individuals construct narratives in opposition to external constraints (whether as capital or as culture). Furthermore, understanding language as a ‘pool’ to be drawn upon places material as a-priori to symbolic, and imagines narrative as a product of social structure. As Brookman et al. (2011) suggest, speaking the code reproduces it, suggesting a two-way relationship.

*Social structure in storytelling contexts*

A final approach understands talk as a form of social action, drawing on ethnomethodology (Sandberg 2010). The main forerunner is Scott and Lyman’s article on how ‘accounts’ bridge the divide between anticipated and actual actions (1968). Close attention to the interactional contexts tends to be found in methodological reflections, especially regarding the interview shapes the narratives told (see Sandberg 2010, Presser 2005, 2009; Fleetwood 2014). Ethnography is best placed to understand the work done by telling stories. For example, Sandberg shows that talking about cannabis use as normal was a way to manage perceptions of stigma *through the performance of talk* (2011). Here, constraint figures in interactional contexts in which narratives are subject to the accountability of others. Miller et al. (examining women meth users’ narratives), note that ‘an important part of ‘doing’ gender is the production, adoption and utilization of gendered stories of self and others to make sense of and negotiate one’s place in the world’ (2015: 71). In the same way that ethnomethodologists understand action as the scaffold or social structure, Miller et al. propose the notion of talk as a ‘*narrative* scaffolding of social structure’ (2015: 71). So, gendered talk does not merely reflect social structure, but actually comprises it.

Considering the social life of stories in their interactional context inevitably involves engaging with wider issues of social inequality, such as gender for example. Agency takes centre stage in the work *done* by individuals constructing of narratives that work for them, but the notion of accountability offers a limited understanding of social structure with regard to narrative, potentially reducing structures, such as gender, to a narrative performance, side-lining material facets of inequality (Jackson 2002).

*Structure and agency: a problematic dualism*

Contrary to the critics, narrative criminology *does* take the ‘real’ world into account: as structures in language, the ways that contexts for storytelling are shaped by social structures and inequalities and in discourse/power. Presser and Sandberg’s defence is fair: ‘Narrative criminologists do take tangible oppressive structures into consideration. We perceive them as important in their own right and as discursive conditioning processes… We investigate hegemonic stories and limitations on creative storytelling due to social context, class, race, gender and so on’(2015a: 14). Nonetheless, as they imply, social structures are often bracketed off: they are understood to condition discourses, or limit individual narrative creativity through available capitals.

Narrative criminology relies on a dualistic conceptualisation of structure/agency. Across diverse theoretical perspectives, individual creativity is typically pitted against constraint, whether located in socio-linguistic structures, cultural codes, or interactional contexts, agency is typically reduced to individual creativity. In contrast, Bourdieu understands individual agency as intricately bound up with the field Sandberg states explicitly: ‘Narrative criminology is situated at the classical *opposition* between agency (what is the teller trying to accomplish?) and structure (which narratives are available?)’ (2010: 455, my emphasis). As a result, agency is under-theorised, and can potentially be reduced to the notion of a utilitarian, universal subject, departing radically from the critical approach called for by Presser (2013).

To account for social inequalities and their relationship to offending, narrative criminology must give consideration, but not primacy, to the social structures that shape narratives, reflecting claims that narratives are culturally and historically specific. Discourses profoundly shape how individuals know the world (Scott 1992; Plummer 1995). An account of structure/agency is needed which maintains a focus on individual subjectivity and meaning-making through language, but which captures the interplay between individuals and social structures, not in opposition, but in a relationship.

**From dualism to duality: reality and representation in Bourdieu’s logic of practice**

Sociological explanations of deviance/crime tended to emphasise either social structure (i.e. culture and subculture), or individual agency (i.e. rational choices) (Downes and Rock 2011). Few would disagree that an adequate explanation ought to include *both* (i.e. Young 2003), but doing so in practice is rather more elusive (Matthews 2009). Bourdieu’s theory aims to transcend subjectivism/objectivism, both of which he considered flawed. Narrative criminologists would no doubt agree with Bourdieu’s critique of objectivism for excluding individual action and experience (ibid). Bourdieu would likely consider much of narrative criminology as subjectivist, and might question whether it offers more than an “’account of the accounts’ produced by social subjects’ (1989: 15). Bourdieu argues that both social action and structure stand in a dialectical relationship in which social action is produced by, and produces social structure (1989, 1990). Bourdieu’s concepts (habitus, capitals and field) are likely familiar, and if not then the reader is directed to existing summaries (i.e. Grenfell 2014). Of particular interest for narrative theorists, is how the habitus connects objective reality and subjective representation (1989: 15).

For Bourdieu, individual actions are shaped by objective structures, through the internalisation of the social field in the habitus, which in turn guides individual action as a set of ‘pre-verbal taken-for-granted’ set of dispositions, sometimes called the ‘feel for the game’ (1990: 68). Although early experiences are significant, the habitus is unfinished, continuously shaped by the ‘field’ through experiences. The habitus both reflects social inequalities in the field, and reproduces them through schemes of perception and action: ‘The most improbable practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that it, to refuse what is already denied. (1990: 54). Importantly for narrative theorists, the habitus shapes perception, imagination and individual’s representations of the social world:

The representations of agents vary with their position [in social space]…and with their habitus as schemes of perception and appreciation of practices, cognitive and evaluative structures which are acquired through lasting experience of a social position. Habitus is both a system of schemes of production of practices *and* a system of perception and appreciation of practices. (1989: 19).

This point is made clear in *The Weight of the World,* a collection of interviews with individuals in socially marginalised settings in France and the USA (Bourdieu et al. 1999). Only by presenting ‘multiple perspectives that correspond to the multiplicity of co-existing and sometimes directly competing, points of view’, can we see the full picture (Bourdieu 1999a: 3). Acknowledging that perspectives differ does not mean an inevitable slide into relativism. Instead, it means taking into account that individual’s perspectives reflect their social world (ibid). By connecting the individual’s point of view (‘schemes of apperception’) to their position in the field, Bourdieu rejects the notion of a universal subject. This is not to deny an objective reality, but rather to account for how one’s position in social space (literally, point of view) shapes its representation. Common sense (what Bourdieu calls *doxa*) pertains to particular fields and is inherently infused with power. Doxa, imposed on others by those with the symbolic capital to do so, constitutes symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1989). Representations, and actions continually construct the field, in ways that reflect inequality and objective social structures.

Bourdieu is often critiqued for presenting too neat a fit between field and habitus offering little space for agency (McNay 2001). Nonetheless, his theory (if not his empirical research) is relatively open to individual agency (Bohman 1997; McNay 1999a), especially in narrative. Firstly, individuals act creatively, albeit within limits proscribed by the habitus, which he describes as ‘regulated improvisation’ (1990: 57, 2000). Bourdieu illustrates with reference to a composer whose compositions are constrained by the objective possibilities of the keyboard itself, as well as the dispositions of the artist, which are shaped by the possibilities that the keyboard and formal musical structures allow (Bourdieu 2000: 116). Furthermore, such improvisations are not predictable: dispositions, embedded in the habitus, generate distinct responses to objective circumstances and events. Criminology has long established that crime can be understood as an innovative response to constrained opportunities: for example Cohen understands the gang as a solution to collective problems (1955). At the same time, gang membership is not the only possible response to limited opportunities and social marginalisation. Gunter’s ethnography of black youth in East London describes a variety of responses to social marginalisation, not only participation in ‘road’ culture, but also education and employment (2010).

Secondly, shared meanings and language are intrinsically flexible: even the same word can have a multiple meanings (Bourdieu 1989: 20). This ‘semantic elasticity’ is an ‘objective element of uncertainty’ which ‘provides a basis for the plurality of visions which is itself linked to the plurality of points of view’ (Ibid). Thirdly, the habitus operates through space and time and therefore offers a dynamic account of agency (Bourdieu 2000). The habitus is transpose-able, continuously applied to new circumstances and fields (Sewell 1992; Bourdieu 2000). It is shaped by the past, and in turn shapes individual’s assessment of their future chances (Bourdieu 2000; McNay 2003). This connection between past and future is intrinsically bound up with narrative, and is fundamentally agential (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Fourthly, in *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu states that habitus and field may sometimes be discordant (2000), for example, individuals moving rapidly through social space, or living through circumstances of rapid social change.

**Narrative habitus**

Bourdieu was interested in language as a tool for class domination and his notion of symbolic violence is well known (1991). Yet, he says little about individual language use (narrative) and considered the habitus only with respect to how people speak, as accent as a marker of class for example, rather than what they say (Bourdieu 1991: 37). The following is a ‘second-degree reading’ that brackets off what he says about language, drawing instead on his theory of social practice (Hanks 2005). Having established that Bourdieu usefully connects objective structures and their subjective representation, the following develops his notion of habitus to incorporate narrative.

The notion of a narrative habitus can be summed up as follows. In the same way that Bourdieu understands the habitus as the internalisation of one’s position in the field, the narrative habitus is the internalisation of the narrative doxa pertaining to the field, including vocabulary, narrative formats, tropes, discursive formats and subject positions etc. Creativity is possible within the limits prescribed by the habitus. The narrative habitus structures individual’s narratives and narrative identity. It sustains and motivates action in two ways: narratives may be habitual, as ongoing rationalisations for behaviours, or evaluations may take place through narrative. Finally, narrative doxa pertaining to fields structure how stories are received, including notions of truth. This dense argument will now be fleshed out in more detail.

*The formation of the narrative habitus*

The habitus is the internalisation of one’s position in the field, which generates action through dispositions and schemes of perception (Bourdieu 1990). A parallel process of internalisation of the doxa of the field can be imagined. Those discourses, narrative formats, tropes and subject positions (i.e. the sense of what is a ‘good story’) in any given field, are also internalised. This is not merely internalisation of pre-formed stories, but rather dispositions toward particular discourses and narrative forms. Next, the narrative habitus generates interpretations and representations. Recall that the constitutive view of narrative sees interpretation as part and parcel of experience (i.e. Bruner 1991). Thus the narrative habitus structures interpretation of events as they occur. This is a small jump from Bourdieu’s own theory. Indeed, it seems impossible to argue that dispositions toward particular actions could be internalised without an accompanying vocabulary, i.e. Wright Mills’ ‘vocabulary of motive’ (1940). Furthermore, it seems logical to suggest that the doxa pertaining to a field may be communicated discursively, at least in part. This is a departure from Bourdieu, who insists that the habitus is pre-verbal: ‘schemes are able to pass directly from practice to practice without moving through discourse’ (Bourdieu 1990: 74). For example, know-how about drug dealing such as quantities, prices and selling practices might be communicated through talk, as much as through practice (Sandberg and Fleetwood, forthcoming).

Bourgois interviews ‘Ramon’ in Spanish Harlem in New York City at the start of the 1990s (1999). Ramon recounts the misery of relying on welfare and living in a shelter, as well as a desire to really ‘live’ rather than merely survive, that lead to dealing crack cocaine.

I talked to my friends about it and told them what I wanted to do: ‘to sell drugs and crap like that, so I can survive.’ You know…save enough money, so I can keep the apartment and… live, you know. Man, you know, make a living and get better… better myself, you understand? (Bourgois 1999: 171-172).

In Bourdieu’s terms, Ramon’s draws on categories of value, or distinction, expressed in language reflecting his field (1999b). In contrast, the notion of the narrative habitus suggests that Ramon draws on narrative tropes, and discourse belonging to his field, in which dealing is a way of ‘living’. Furthermore, his entre to dealing is done narratively: he tells his friends the ‘right’ narrative for that field. As an aside, his narrative would not be credible in a criminal justice setting such as a court, and clearly belongs to the street field. An orthodox ethnomethodological analysis would consider the strategic work done by Ramon’s narrative– in this case, successfully gaining entré.. A narrative analysis reminds us that Ramon can only engage narratives ingrained in his habitus which suggest dealing as a way to ‘live’ in this particular field. Recall that the narrative habitus reflects Ramon’s position in the field, and therefore also power relations. The action-storylines embedded in the habitus reinstate power inequalities pertaining to the field. Yet, the habitus generates action, but does not determine it. Ramon’s narrative is an example of ‘regulated improvisation’ (Bourdieu 1990: 57); narratives can be creative, but only within the limits of the habitus. Drug dealing is one narrative Ramon has learned in his field, and because it is ingrained in the habitus it appears natural and logical. But, at the same time, it is not the only one available.

The habitus is continuous dialogue with the field; new narrative forms are garnered through experience (notwithstanding the durability of early experience). Narrative changes are apparent in research showing that prison makes available new narrative forms, either through regimes or rehabilitation activities (Toyoki and Brown 2014; Stevens 2012). Nonetheless, the durability of the habitus means that change cannot happen quickly: narratives inculcated through decades of life experience cannot be replaced by those learnt in a few months.

*Narratives reproduce the field*

Storytelling is a form of social action generated by the habitus. Just like other forms of social action it *reproduces the field.* This is not a one-way relationship. Recall that Brookman et al. (2001) claim that storytelling reproduces the code of the street. . This occurs firstly through the act of storytelling itself, and secondly though the reproduction of discourses and the social structures they support. The first point is well established in ethnomethodological approaches that understand talk as a form of social action (Blumer 1969; Scott and Lyman 1968), and linguistic approaches to anthropology (Ahearne 2001:111). Narrative research drawing on ethnomethodology also makes this point. Miller et al. understand women’s meth users narratives as the narrative scaffold of social structures of gender (2015).

Narratives also reproduce social structures through repetition and use; discourses depend on being re-told by individuals for their continuation (Plummer 1995; Jackson 1998). Drawing on ethnographic research with young men in ‘Langton’, Fraser describes how the notion of the Glasgow ‘gang’ was part of the ‘street habitus’ of his respondents (2015). One way of affirming the Langton Youth Team (LYT) was to denigrate their equivalents in neighbouring Swigton. These mythical denigrations were ‘woven into the fabric of group conversation, tossed ad hoc into ongoing banter in a playful and knockabout manner.’ (2015: 152). Upon seeing boys from Swigton, the Langside boys would shout in unison ‘Steals Yir Trainers!’ (ibid). This narrative ritual thus constructs the boundary between Swigton and Langside. As well as reproducing the field, narratives also have the power to change it. Plummer and Jackson argue that the emergence of narratives about coming out and rape, respectively, have produced positive social change (Plummer 1995; S. Jackson 1998). The notion that narratives reproduce (and can change) fields is faithful to Bourdieu’s notion of duality.

*Plural fields; multiple narrative doxa*

Bourdieu imagines individuals as situated in more than one field (2000) and so their habitus will contain doxa relating to these plural fields. This might create opportunities for narrative creativity, or regulated improvisation. Remember that Sandberg’s Oslo drug dealers switched between gangster and oppression discourses (2009). They learned, and drew upon discourses belonging to street dealing (i.e. gangster discourse), as well as those belonging to the welfare state (oppression discourse). Straddling fields can also create difficulties for individuals. Bourdieu notes that ‘to contradictory positions, which tend to exert structural ‘double binds’ on their occupants, there often correspond destabilized habitus, torn by contradiction and internal division (Bourdieu 2000: 160). Feminist scholarship describes intersecting axes of oppression, such as gender, class and race (Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1991). Bev Skeggs’ ethnography of working class women in England demonstrates the close contingency between class and gender: her respondents cannot enact femininity *or* class. Instead, ways to enact gender are constrained by class and vice versa (Skeggs 1997). Although Skeggs’ does not take into account personal narratives, she demonstrates that working class women were discursively positioned (as variously caring or vulgar), and navigated these classifications in their daily lives. Skeggs’ respondents took care in their appearance, treading the fine line between being respectably feminine, and not appearing to be ‘rough’. One respondent explains: ‘You’ve got to weigh everything up: is it too tarty? Will I look like a right slag in it? What will people think?’. The convergence of discourses about class and gender offered women less choice of subjectivities, a structural ‘double bind’. Thus, being positioned across multiple fields may make it harder to produce coherent narratives that match the doxa across fields.

*Narrative identity*

The narrative identity, or one’s sense of self shapes how we experience and act upon the world: ‘Individuals act in certain ways because it would violate their sense of being to do otherwise’ (McNay 1999b: 318). Discourses, pertaining to fields and inculcated in the habitus make available particular subject positions (Foucault 2012, Lauclau and Mouffe 1985). By subject position, I mean the positions in discourse available to the speaker: in a narrative sense, the protagonist in a story; a literary character. Subject positions are foundational to agency: it is only by knowing oneself as an agent in a particular field that one can act. Thus, narrative identity is not the outcome of agency, but rather, agency is constituted in/through narrative identity. And, although an individual might draw on multiple subject positions ingrained in the habitus, these are not readily changed. This is illustrated by Henrik, a Norwegian cannabis dealer interviewed in prison (Sandberg and Fleetwood, forthcoming), who states: “What the fuck am I going to talk about? The last years have been all about crime, drugs.” The kinds of narrative formats and discourses ingrained in his habitus seem to offer few possibilities for telling other kinds of stories about himself.

Narrative identity is not constructed in isolation, but in relation to others (Somers 1994). Telling narratives to others may serve to validate (or refute) them. Thus, although personal narratives are generated by the habitus, this does not rule out the role of interactions in shaping narratives. The social ‘other’ may figure through imagined interactions, i.e. the generalised ‘other’ (Blumer 1969). A person might ask, ‘what kind of person would I be if….?’ This process is a narrative one.[[7]](#footnote-7)

*Explaining action 1: habitual narratives*

So, how does the narrative habitus work? Since the habitus is pre-reflexive, it follows that *narratives may be habitual*: part and parcel of the feel for the game, whereby actions, rationalisations and narratives are used in a habitual way. These kinds of narrative are common sense, and naturalise ‘the way things are’. The habitual narratives of women in/around the drug business explain their involvement in drug trafficking (Fleetwood 2014). Selling drugs is part of Rosa’s habitual self-narrative; it is unremarkable to her, part of her ‘feel for the game’. Having dealt cannabis and cocaine from a young age, she simply continued to do ‘what she knew best’, dealing drugs to provide for her loved ones, as her parents had also done when she was a child (Fleetwood 2014). Her narrative identity is the basis for habitual action: her self-story as provider sustains drug dealing.

*Explaining action 1: the narrative habitus as the basis for evaluation*

The narrative habitus is the basis for strategic evaluations. Bourdieu emphasises the pre-cognitive, embodied functioning of the habitus, but evaluations are guided by the habitus through its operation as ‘an estimation of chances, presupposing transformation of the past effect into an expected objective’ (Bourdieu 1990: 53).[[8]](#footnote-8) Bourdieu’s schemes of apperception can be imagined as possible storylines suggesting probable outcomes of action, ingrained in the narrative habitus. So, when individuals weigh up opportunities and chances, they do so on the basis of their narrative identity, as the protagonist in a hoped-for story, according to the array of stories that they know. Thus, evaluation is done via story-making: “How will the story end if I do such-and-such?” For example, Emma, who was offered the opportunity to traffic cocaine, recounts: ‘I was like, I’m 19, that’s not my line of work. I’m going to go to University ’n get a job’n I’m not going to do that kind of thing!’ (Fleetwood 2014). Trafficking drugs does not fit with her habitual self-narrative as a middle-class, British backpacker and soon-to-be student. She weighs up the possibility, drawing on possible storylines, rejecting the possible ‘get rich quick’ story: “I wouldn’t risk anything like that for a bit of money to spend on rubbish.” Compared to Rosa (above) drug dealing has a completely different meaning, reflecting their different ‘points of view’ in social space, inculcated in the narrative habitus. The notion of inculcation is important. Rather than existing in culture as general storied forms available to all (see Ioannou et al. 2016), these storylines reflect the speaker’s position in social space. Like Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus, the narrative habitus rejects the notion of a rational actor, emphasising instead the situated-ness of knowledge in social structure.

*Listeners’ habitus: reception and appreciation of narratives*

Lastly, as the habitus shapes “perception and appreciation of practices” (Bourdieu 1989: 19), so the narrative habitus shapes how narratives are heard and received*.* Stories that reflect the narrative formats of the field are more likely to be received as ‘true’. This is evident in the way that accounts of sexual violence are ‘heard’ in the criminal justice field, for example in courts or by police. For example, Saunders’ research examines how police distinguish between truthful and false reports of rape, noting that their particular account of a false account differs considerably from the ‘common sense’ notion of a false report held by researchers (i.e. Saunders 2012). Similarly, the academic field disposes researchers toward recognising some stories as more ‘true’ than others, where respondents employ discourses that match our narrative dispositions and tastes. Sandberg et al. argue that researchers have likely cleaved off aspects of interviews that do not correspond to their theoretical interests (2015). Analysing interviews with violent offenders, they note that respondents formulate their narratives drawing on a variety of discourses, including business discourses and moral narratives, which map onto academic theories (or discourses) about violence such as rational choice, and neutralisations respectively (ibid). In selecting one kind of discourse at the neglect of others, researchers have arguably offered a partial account of violence.

**Representation and reality in a Bourdieuian, narrative analysis**

This section clarifies the relationship between representation/narrative and reality/objective social structures that underpins the narrative habitus. Firstly, social structure is not prior to narrative representation since subjective representations and objective reality exist in duality. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, McNay explains:

If social action is to be properly understood, then it is important to analyse the representations that actors have of the world, and the way these inform action and interaction. Such representations cannot be deduced from social structures. Nor, however, do they encompass social reality in that they are determined by structures that are at one remove from immediate experience (2004: 183).

Next, not all of social reality is encompassed in narrative. The narrative habitus is therefore an addition to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus as embodied and pre-verbal. Although narrative is a form of social action, not all social actions are narrative. Some, such as ability to kick a football, are pre-conscious in the sense originally proposed by Bourdieu. Embodied tastes and desires may go un-told; some phenomenological ‘seductions’ of crime (Katz 1998) are deeply sensual. Nonetheless, narratives – as literary forms capable of inspiring emotion - may be aesthetically compelling (Presser 2009). For example, Jackson-Jacobs recounts the ‘seductions’ of fighting *and* talking about it afterward:

By the end of the night they had achieved the final product, the major incentive to fight: a dramatic fight story that will endure for years, retold to impress others of their daring selves, and to conjure both individual accomplishments and a sense of deep solidarity. The fighters walk away with battered bodies. But injuries heal and disputes are forgotten. The stories are not: they will be retold, remembered and cherished for years. (2004: 241).

It is important to analyse empirically the relationship between individual’s narratives and how they inform action, as McNay states above. The relationship between narrative and action will not be the same in all circumstances. Archer critiques Bourdieu for collapsing social structure and agency, arguing that we ought to understand the heterogenous ways in which structure and agency are related (2013). She might ask: can the concept of the narrative habitus help understand the variability of structure and agency (in other words, the ways in which individuals have more or less agency)? Arguably it can! Narratives are the ‘hinge’ between individuals and society (Presser 2009). Analysis of narratives can trace social structures, and examine how they structure action through narrative. Studying narrative – as the juncture between structure and agency – can potentially avoid collapsing structure and agency into one another.

Bourdieuian scholars may take exception to stretching habitus to include narrative.

But, as Plummer says, we are ‘homo narrans’; we live in a storytelling society (1995). It seems impossible to think of a valid theory of social action that did not take this vital, human storytelling activity into account. The proposed second-degree reading reflects Bourdieu’s intent – to overcome the problems of a purely objectivist or subjectivist perspective. It also retains his insistence on the ‘active presence’ of the past on social action (Bourdieu 1990:52). Nonetheless, the relationship between language and social structure described above is a departure. Rather than examining the imposition of doxa as symbolic violence, the notion of a narrative habitus instead considers how individuals, in constructing personal narratives, have to do so in relation to dominant discourses (reflecting fields of power), but can nonetheless employ agency in the construction of those narratives by drawing on discourses learned and carried in the habitus. This is a rather more agential conceptualisation of the individual that Bourdieu allows for, at least in relation to language use.

Finally, I focus on habitus at the expense of companion concepts – capitals and field. These have been discussed in criminology, and my approach is largely complementary (Ilan 2012; Fraser 2015; Shammas and Sandberg 2015; Sandberg and Pedersen 2009). Synergies between Bourdieuian and narrative criminologies warrant further exploration. For example, scholarship might consider the dialectic between capitals, field and narrative.

**Narrative interventions**

Presser states: ‘Narrative pathways to action suggest narrative interventions’ (2009: 191). There are two possible interpretations. If individual creativity is emphasised, then interventions will be individualised. Psychological interventions promoting desisting self-stories may sometimes be appropriate and valuable, and narrative research may usefully inform cognitive based rehabilitation programmes, for example (Hochstetler et al. 2010). Nonetheless, King argues that agency is socially conditioned, and so changing narratives alone may not provoke change (2013). Narratives inculcated in the habitus are likely to be resistant to change. Individual, narrative interventions may, in some circumstances, do harm. Feminist scholarship shows that criminal justice responses which aim to re-socialise women into their proper role (as mothers, carers and so on) – in other words, interventions which seek to impose a particular narrative of femininity – do women a great injustice (Carlen 1983; Haney 2010). Thus, narrative interventions can, in Bourdieu’s terms, do ‘symbolic violence’ through the imposition of dominant discourses onto marginalised populations.

If narrative criminology emphasises social structure, then a different kind of intervention is suggested: in the field of power, at the level of discourse. Tognato describes a shift in discourses about tax evasion in Italy (2015). Tax evaders were commonly referred to as ‘furbetti’, a word mothers use to scold children, roughly meaning someone (usually a man) who is amoral but likeable, accommodating cultural notions that paying tax is not exactly obligatory. As the financial crisis deepened, Befera, the leader of Equitalia (and others) challenged this discourse by appealing to culturally sacred notions of loyalty and family by stating that tax evaders were effectively robbing the community and the nation’s children. A Bourdieuian analysis might consider what made this narrative intervention successful (the speaker’s position in the field, and relative cultural and social capital for instance). However, a Bourdieuian narrative criminology might consider how stories of loyalty and family ‘trump’ the trope of the ‘furbetti’, and how how stories can change objective realities to reduce harm. Unlike individual narrative interventions, which could be understood as symbolic violence, interventions at the level of discourse target harmful discourses, rather than individuals.

Discursive interventions nonetheless need to consider how individuals creatively incorporate ‘official’ discourse in their narratives. For example, MacLean found that young people who sniff solvents drew on discourses of intense pleasure, and anti-solvent public health messages about solvent use as life threatening in describing their experience of intoxication. Rather than being contradictory, respondents’ awareness of the closeness of death heightened their pleasure (McLean 2008). Similarly, Tutenges and Sandberg’s research on drinking cultures notes that unpleasant, gross and even violent drunken experiences can be narrated afterwards as hilarious and part of drinking stories (2013), suggesting that campaigns promoting sensible drinking through discourses about drunken disgrace may be incorporated into, rather than challenge, drinking stories.

The intention is not to set up a debate about whether narrative criminology ought to support toward interventions at the level of individual narrative or at the level of discourse. Individual narratives have the power to change discourses, and vice versa and arguably the most effective interventions will aim for both. From a Bourdieuian perspective, sustainable change is likely to involve changes in both: tentative narrative shifts can lead to new experiences, which then become embedded in the habitus. Alternatively, narrative changes could, potentially, involve the mobilisation of other available discourses in play (as seen in the case of the ‘furbetti’). This could work at the level of the individual, as well as the cultural level suggested by Tognato (2015). Thus, not only is the narrative habitus be transformative tool for narrative analysis, it also has potential relevance for narrative interventions.

**Conclusion**

This article argues for a sociological turn in narrative analysis, sensitised to questions of inequality, power and social structure, drawing on Bourdieu’s social theory and in particular his notion of habitus. Drawing on narrative theory, this article proposes that the habitus includes the inculcation of narrative dispositions, formats and discourses pertaining to fields, generating action through narrative identity, habitual narratives and evaluations. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of ‘regulated improvisation’, narrative analysis can better trace social structures and agency in offenders’ narratives, and thereby understand how social inequality shapes the narratives that promote and sustain offending and harmful behaviours. Understanding narrative as a form of social action leads to questions about how narratives are produced by, and produce social structures. Rather than seeing narratives as the site of agency and creativity, we ought to understand how they perpetuate social inequalities. Only in doing so, can narrative criminology become more explicitly engaged with questions of social justice through attention to social structure, rather than merely the individual.

**Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Sveinung Sandberg and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

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1. Interestingly for narrative theorists, his account is explicitly literary; fragmented rather than chronological. The central concern is to quite literally decode the meaning of his lyrics for the reader. This representation is fundamentally an interpretation, rather than mere representation. He states: “I saw it [rap] as a way to recreate myself, and reimagine my world” (2010: 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frank first proposed the narrative habitus as an ‘inner library of stories’ (2010): ‘the intuitive, usually tacit sense that some story is for us or not for us; that it expresses possibilities of which we are or can be part, or that represents a world in which we have no stake’. (2010: 52-53). Nonetheless, Frank’s notion of the inner library downplays power: being disposed toward particular stories weaker than Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus as ‘ruling out what is already denied’ (1990: 54). The reproduction of inequality is at the heart of Bourdieu’s work and needs to be maintained. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Longitudinal research interviews (i.e. repeat interviews over time) might also be able to solve this before-or-after dilemma, but is still troubled by the need to identify offenders before they were offending. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Discourse is used here to mean a shared collection of meanings pertaining to a particular field, i.e. legal discourse. In contrast narrative is an individual story, which draws on discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Despite its centrality in social enquiry structure resists definition, leading Sewell to argue it is not so much a concept as an ‘epistemic metaphor’, or metonymic device (1992: 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sandberg and Pedersen foreshadow the notion of the narrative habitus: ‘Most of the time [personal narratives] exemplify what Bourdieu calls ‘le sens pratique’ or habitus: it is learned, strategic, but used without reflection’ (2009: 527). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ethnomethodologists note that we are ‘accountable’ to real or imagined others (Garfinkel 1967; Scott and Lyman 1968). Blumer understands the self as the product of an internal conversation between the ‘I’ who observes the ‘me’ (Blumer 1969). Narrative criminologists understand this ‘me’ as a narrative identity, which informs action, but can nonetheless be reflected on, and so acted upon (i.e Maruna 2001). So, the ‘me’ can be understood as the discursive subject generated by the habitus according to experience, and positioned in social space. At the same time, the ‘I’, which Blumer says we can never catch sight of (because when we do it becomes a ‘me’), can be understood as also part of the habitus, operating pre-discursively. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bohman understands the habitus as the basis for practical-reflexivity (1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)