

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds by Ken Plummer

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respondents migrated from places where there was no such tolerance. Of course, white gay men migrate to urban centers for similar reasons. Yet there may be a difference, which I'll state sharply, but that merits further study. In many small and medium-sized cities, white-dominated gay public cultures (e.g., bars, community centers, women's buildings, political clubs) have been elaborated. Such subcultures make possible an open gay life and, combined with establishing a gay political presence, make social integration or mixing possible. This is less characteristic of black urban enclaves. Hawkeswood himself acknowledges that there are few gay bars, virtually no gay political clubs in Harlem, no community center, no major gay spokespersons or leaders among Harlem's elite. In short, Hawkeswood documents the incomplete development of a gay black public culture in Harlem. If black gay public cultures are less institutionally elaborated, it is in part because of the relative lack of public support by key black elites. This should not be overstated. While there is strong support among some white elites for gay rights and affirmative public lesbian/gay/bisexual identities, there is also organized antigay opposition. By contrast, many key elites in black life such as ministers, intellectuals, and entertainers, are, if not publicly antigay, then reluctant to offer vocal support for the public affirmation of homosexual identities and communities. If the above conjectures are at all on the mark, Harlem may not be the best site for commenting on the state of gay black America, though it may represent a cultural ideal for at least gay African-Americans.

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*Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds*, by **Ken Plummer**. New York: Routledge, 1996. 244 pp. \$16.95 paper. ISBN: 0-415-10296-0. \$65.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-415-10295-2.

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Lively discussions about narrative and its study are active in most disciplines in the social sciences and humanities today. Each has a key figure or even a subfield devoted to the study of narratives and/or stories (sometimes the one

is conceptualized as different from the other). Some scholars in these discussions have developed what might be called a narrative perspective, thus seeing narrative as an orientation from which to study human lives. In rhetoric and communication studies, for example, Walter R. Fisher's book, *Human Communication as Narration*, has suggested that all symbolic action can be understood as part and parcel of stories, in that such action is grounded in particular histories and cultures, with different genres of discourse being erected upon a value-logic of "good reasons." Each discourse thus plays a narrative that warrants particular beliefs and actions. All of this, Fisher argues, is and ought to be assessable through a basic human capacity, the ability of people to utilize a rhetorical logic of narration. In psychology, similarly, a subfield has been dubbed "narrative psychology" and has been most recently discussed in Jerome Bruner's *The Culture of Education*. According to Bruner, stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others organize our senses of who we are, who others are, and how we are to be related. How we learn to tell such stories, understand and assess them, and know when to use particular ones—this is what the "culture of education" is all about.

Another tale is told by Barbara Johnstone. She takes a more sociolinguistic view, examining how stories activate a personal and social dialectic, constructing senses of personal identities and social relationships, parts of which weave a robust communal story about a midwestern "city that saved itself" (i.e., Fort Wayne, Indiana). Her book, *Stories, Community, and Place*, demonstrates that intimate link between stories and place, each providing tellers with discursive themes that express a sense of who they, collectively, are. Similarly, in Anthropology and Folklore, Richard Bauman's *Story, Performance, and Event* examines the oral performances of stories by Texans in specific social contexts, bringing into view the relation between the telling of a story, that which it narrates, and the social occasion on which it is told. As a result of these inquiries, readers are offered insights into the local lives—in Fort Wayne and Texas—of which these stories play an intimate part, and also into the general role stories play in creating and fashioning societal life.

Just what is a story? The treatment of the subject by the above authors (and Plummer

below) varies. Some (like Fisher) envision "narrative" as a paradigm within which we understand human symbolic action and discourses. All symbolic interaction and genres of discourse, therefore, could (and should) be "read" into a larger narrative constructed by the analyst in order to provide an account of the particular values and logics in the symbolic action of concern. Specific beliefs and actions, therefore, become featured in a more general way, with this story revealing how values and rationalities—or lack of value and reason—are pressed into rhetorical service. Bruner operates similarly, opening a new door for traditional psychological studies and providing access into a room where personality, traits, mind, cognitive development, and the like become concepts in larger psychological narratives and cultural lives. As a result, classic psychological concerns move from the hidden mind into the discursive arena. Fisher and Bruner propose narrative as an encompassing paradigm that promises to enlarge their respective fields of scholarly discourse, and through which one can ply one's academic trade.

The approach of Johnstone and Bauman is much more modest. For them, narrative is a particular form of communication, as when one tells a story to a particular audience on a social occasion—about the great flood in Fort Wayne, about trading coon dogs in Texas—with the specifics of these performances themselves being worthy of careful study and reflection. From this angle, narrative becomes a prominent and potent form of human symbolic action, historically grounded, socially occasioned in a particular cultural and political context—an action to be read close-to-that-ground, as it were.

Kenneth Plummer's book enters this scholarly conversation on narrative inquiry with an interest in developing "a sociology of stories" and with attention to a wealth of particular stories about sexual life. His main task is dual, to show how personal narratives of sexuality are deeply personal, social, and political actions and to develop a preliminary framework for a "sociology of stories." He begins by asking: how does one put a story together about personal sexual experience? More specifically, how, if at all, do people who have been raped, are "coming out," or are recovering from sexual abuse narrate those experiences? These are the probes that

motivate the heart of Plummer's focused, wide-ranging, and well-researched analyses. Plummer works at the juncture of several traditions but mainly as pragmatist, social constructionist, and symbolic interactionist, with his conceptual frame seeking to keep in view the story features of texts, the political conditions of and in their making, the producers and audiences of the stories, and the interactive networks of social activity of which they are intimately a part (e.g., p. 23). There is more at work on the conceptual level than just this—and sometimes the reader must try hard to pull this out—but as a theoretical overview this suggests a promising narrative paradigm in-the-work that is turned to the analysis of specific sexual stories.

One of the most intriguing and useful dimensions of Plummer's analysis is the attention to the raw personal, political, and communal resources that are used in these story constructions. For example, Plummer makes this point about an earlier time and place in this century: "If you were a 'sex addict' [or gay, or raped by your spouse], you certainly had no language for it and no means of talking about it" (p. 110), at least in a publicly efficacious way. Silenced, the experience was rendered inert and inactive in social life and in public-policy discourse. Yet as a "language" or narrative form evolves for such tellings: "The private pains increasingly become public ones; the personal sufferings become collective participations; the pathological languages turn to political ones" (p. 110). As stories develop of such concerns, if they can, so too do different forms of personal, social, and political awareness and action. It is this process of the political evolving from personal sexual experience, and of the struggle to generate a communally viable story, that Plummer nicely brings into view in the heart of his book.

Plummer's core analyses are most sturdily built on empirical work that explores tales of coming out, rape, and recovery from sexual abuse. Each explores the social conditions of tellings, issues of identity and community that are actively engaged in the tales, and conditions for the tales so told. Also, this set of stories provides a basis for a convincing and brief contrast of these, for example, showing how public rape stories and coming-out stories are more explicitly operating as political actions, with recovery tales being less clearly so.

Plummer not only contrasts these stories but also looks across them, and presents a brief look at a more general narrative form. This "generic process of telling sexual stories" (p. 126), Plummer shows, moves through five very loosely bounded phases: (1) an envisioning process, or becoming cognizant of something that needs to be told, attempting to identify it, and naming it; (2) an articulation phase: developing a publicly viable vocabulary for this feeling, action, or issue; (3) an identificational phase: developing a space for an identity that is caught in the action and issue and thus begins to hold some traction in the community (e.g., as "gay," "survivor"); (4) a communal phase: others become cognizant of and receptive to the tale; and (5) a phase in which the issue becomes part of the essentially contestable public discourse about social problems and their remedy. And thus Plummer moves us along with his "sociology of stories," from particular stories about sexual experience, as personal, social, and political actions, to comparisons of stories, to generic processes involved in the social life of sexual stories, themselves.

On the whole, this very well-written book offers engaging reading partly because it invites readers to consider seriously the particular dynamics of sexual stories, and partly because Plummer treats those stories variously, for example, as illuminating of sexual life, as—lightly—U.S. American and British cultural texts, as personal and social and political forms of action, as parts of what he calls "intimate citizenship," and as sites of social transition and change. This is a lot to accomplish in a book, and Plummer pulls it off generously, self-consciously opening up many paths for future inquiry along the way.

Individual readers may find, upon reading Plummer's work, that they have other stories they want told. Followers of Roman Jakobson and Richard Bauman might wish for clearer and more formal distinctions among the narrative under discussion itself, the narrative event in which it was used (i.e., the social occasion for its telling), and the event being narrated. Some conversation analysts who follow Jenny Mandelbaum and Emmanuel Schegloff might insist that not nearly enough attention is being given to the interactional occasion or negotiation of a telling. Some modernists might be put off by the willingness to entertain indeterminacies, fragments, and

borrowings (e.g., pp. 138–139). Some postmodernists might object to the insistence that most of the stories analyzed are being told as if they were true, and are thus anchored in a presumed "truth" that is active in some social world. I take all these to be positive responses, that is, to be signs of an engaging work, well researched and written, provocative in a very good sense. There is a sociological paradigm implicitly at work here for the study of narrative, and a careful examination of a body of stories. It is this combination of titillating topic, narrative paradigm and practice, and the indeterminate yet deliberate play between them that makes Plummer's work a timely and productive tale.

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*The Gift of Generations: Japanese and American Perspectives on Aging and the Social Contract*, by **Akiko Hashimoto**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 226 pp. \$49.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-521-48307-7. \$17.95 paper. ISBN: 0-521-55520-5.

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*The Gift of Generations* explores Japanese and American ways of seeking and receiving help for elderly citizens. From private discourses to social contracts, the author peels away layers of meanings involving aging, expectations we have about our elderly, and transformations in Japanese and American society regarding human needs and social relationships. Hashimoto presents case studies to illustrate ways that "assumptions, preferences and choices" involving intergenerational interactions are made by Japanese and Americans.

The work is based on multiple methods. Most of the research is qualitative, with several excellent charts and tables suggesting a wealth of quantitative data used to extrapolate the findings. It is unusual that the book's section on methodology is presented as the final chapter.

Akiko Hashimoto, who lived and interacted with her sources, calls herself a "participant observer." She lived in West Haven, Connecticut, for 15 months and in Odawara, Japan, for 9 months. During those sojourns she visited a number of settings, from