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Delinquens Narrator – on the Roots and Selected Aspects of the Narrative Approach to Criminality

*We do not experience the world as it is,
because it is as we experience it...*

Teresa Walas (1993, p. 44)

Abstract: For several decades now we have been observing the growing importance of the so-called narrative approach in social sciences. The concept of narratives is also used more and more often – both theoretically and methodologically – in discussions on the nature of crime. The aim of this article is to indicate the prospects for applying the concept of “narratives” in studies on crime, and thus the possibility of using the results of this research in social rehabilitation.

Key words: narratives, criminality, social rehabilitation, therapy

Introduction

For several decades now we have been observing the growing importance of the so-called narrative approach in humanities and social sciences. The concept of narrative, until a few years ago present mainly in the works of philosophers and the research of literary scholars, is used today by representatives of psychology, anthropology, sociology, pedagogy, criminology, legal sciences, historians of

ideas, and even representatives of medical sciences (Burzyńska 2008; Nowak-Dziemianowicz 2014). In 1994, the outstanding American literary critic Martin Kreiswirth called this phenomenon “the narrative turnaround”. In his next work, he termed the growing number of scientific discussions on narrative an “eruption” and indicated the almost obsessive interest in the said issue (Kreiswirth 1994, 2000).

The construct of the narrative is also being used increasingly – both theoretically and methodologically – in discussions on the nature of crime (cf. among others: Katz 1988; Toch 1993; Presser 2004, 2009; Youngs and Canter 2011; Poulton 2012). However, it seems that while the vision of the human is described by the phrase *homo narrator* (Wolicka 1993) is obvious for humanists, then the term proposed by us *delinquens narrator*, indicating the importance of subjective “stories” about crime, is only just becoming popular among criminologists. The purpose of this article is to indicate the prospects of applying the concept of narrative studies on criminality, and thus the possibility of using the results of this research in social rehabilitation.

The narrative approach – selected inspirations

Sources of the narrative approach can be found in several areas of science. Undoubtedly, one of the most important are the works of eminent philosophers, mainly representatives of hermeneutical philosophy. As Anna Burzyńska writes: “Thanks to the idea of the narrative, philosophical thought has found appropriate conditions for transition from the substantial to the dynamic recognition of the subject, while the trail leading from the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am”, through the hermeneutic “I understand, therefore I am”, has been finalized in the narrative “I tell, therefore I am” (Burzyńska 2008, p. 33). It is worth mentioning a few thinkers who in a special way have placed their mark on this trail, and also paved the way for the narrative revolution”¹.

Martin Heidegger, who is considered to be the precursor of the narrative theory of identity, in his fundamental work *Being and Time* (1927, 2013) points out that one of the basic characteristics of a person is his being in time and changes that the individual is subject to in the process of developing his own existence. Heidegger also emphasizes the processes of understanding and self-understanding (self-narration), as conditions and also ways of being human. Jean-Paul Sartre (1938/1974) in the novel *Nausea* indicates the narrative as

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¹ Discussing all the philosophical inspiration of the narrative approach exceeds the scope of the article. However, it should be noted that besides those mentioned, among others, Anthony Giddens’ concept of narrative identity (2010) and Hubert Hermans’ theory of the dialogue Self (2002) are recognized as key trends in literature on the subject.

the key to the essence of humanity: “A person is always a teller of events, he lives surrounded by his events and the events of others; he sees everything that happens through them; and he tries to live his life as if he was telling it”. In the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, the key words were, among others, narrative, identity and time. Historical time, as Ricoeur writes (1984, p. 52), reaches the human dimension “to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full significance when it becomes a condition of temporal existence”². According to him, human identity has a narrative character – it is constructed throughout the individual’s entire life. Narrative identity consists of two essential aspects: *Identitas* – expressing internal coherence and stability, and *ipseity* – an element related to the dynamics of changes over time. Additionally, the fact that the identity of the individual has a narrative character, according to the author, is associated with the fact that we give meaning to our existence by establishing relationships with other people (cf. Dauenhauer and Pellauer 2014).

In the middle of the previous century a trend also appeared in historiographical research, later called narrativism. The authors of works such as *The Idea of History* (Collingwood, 1948), *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Danto 1965) or *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (White 1973), contested the meaning of the study of “objective historical facts”, stressing that one cannot separate past events from their interpretations.

When it comes to psychological inspirations of the narrative approach, they can be found in several areas, including in studies of cognitive psychology and the psychology of human development. Prominent cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner notes that logical thinking is neither the only nor the most common form of mental processes. He indicates the importance of narrative, by writing: “A life lived cannot be separated from life told – or, more bluntly, life is not “as it is but such as it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and once again told” (Bruner, 1990, p. 17). The cognitive scientist, Mark Turner, in the extensively commented work *The Literary Mind* (1996) points to the fundamental importance of narrative and the fact that narrative competence is the basis of cognitive processes, and one of the greatest achievements of evolution.

Another cognitive scientist and philosopher – Daniel Dennett (1991) – proposes heterophenomenology as a new approach in the study of the mind, consisting in compiling the narratives of the subject with objective data obtained by experimental methods. In his view, the “Self” is at the center of narrative gravity, a construct, which focuses the stories of the brain on the experience of the subject. So, narratives constitute the subjective dimension of subjectivity, although they are not necessarily credible interpretations of experiences and activities of the subject.

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² Orig.: “to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full significance when it becomes a condition of temporal existence”.

The aforementioned (in the person of Martin Kreiswirth) literary-narratology scholars observed that even small children telling a story, are aware of its inner order, so they are equipped with the basic understanding of the narrative. This is confirmed by psychological studies on the theory of the mind. The authors of the so-called test of unexpected change (Wimmer and Perner 1983)³ emphasize that in order for a child to solve it, it must understand the mental states of other people and be aware of the sequence of events presented (cf. Wimmer and Weichbold 1994). Charlie Lewis' research (1994) showed that even three-year-olds can solve the test of unexpected change, and that the results are better, the more the child is involved in the narrative of the story (e.g. if it tells the story to the experimenter).

On the basis of the cognitive approach the ability to create narratives about their own actions is the basis upon which the child interprets the behavior of others as intentional beings, thus building the theory of the mind using the category of beliefs and desires. The results show that this competence is to some extent innate and requires the activity of specific centers of the central nervous system (Heyes 2009).

The results of Polish psychologists' studies confirm the importance of narrative in the development of the mind. Already in 1989, Maria Kielar-Turska wrote in a study on children's speech about the importance of narrative, which is a story serving "to present the sequence of events in time" (1989, p. 93). Barbara Bokus (2000) pointed out that young children can take the perspective of the narrative's main character. Marta Białecka-Pikul (2002) proved that there is a correlation between the degree of realism of the narrative presented to children and the ability to understand the motives of behavior of the characters in the story.

Narratives and self-narratives

Jerzy Trzebiński (2008), writing about the narrative in psychological terms, distinguishes four basic meanings of the term. Narrative can be spoken about as:

- a form of understanding reality (in terms of both understanding the situation and events in terms of the history and the process of the narrative creation of the world and one's self-image);
- specifics of interpersonal communication (establishing and maintaining dialogue requires a reference to the narrative competence; additionally, communication can be seen as the process of giving meaning);

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³ The test of unexpected change is a version of the research situation known as *false believe task*. It consists in presenting a story to a child where there are two characters. First, they hide a certain object together, and then one of them (in the absence of the other) changes the hiding place of the object. Children are asked where the second character of the story should look to find it.

- the structure of the text (originally the domain of literary scholars and linguists; currently the area of cognitive studies, among others, interested in the relationships between the narrative structure of the text and the process of processing of information);
- narrative methods of research (usually their application consists in the fact that the person examined is to tell his life story or a specific event; in contrast, the diagnostician tries to reach the deep layer of the story, in order to reconstruct the overall vision of the world that the individual has).

According to Dan McAdams (2001), the essential functions of the narrative includes activating and giving meaning of the life experiences of the subject. In other works by this author (McAdams 1985, 1993, 1999), we can also find support for the viewpoint, in line with which narrations of an individuals are a factor influencing the behavior of the coherent identity in time. This influence may relate to both explaining the sense of particular events in the life history of the subject, as well as serve to confirm consistency in the dimension of personality.

Dan McAdams (2001) notes that in self-narratives two main “emotional patterns” can be distinguished, namely:

- a) the contaminating sequence, which is expressed in the build-up of negative emotions of a fatalistic and anxious nature; states with a positive or at least acceptable tone of emotion inevitably change into their denial (which is reflected by beliefs like “happiness is temporary”, “no good things happen to me”, “you cannot count on the benevolence of fate” or “if things are going well for me now, the I’ll have to pay for it soon”), and
- b) the sequence of redemption, which reflects the hopeful belief that adverse situations always find a positive conclusion, and overcoming obstacles brings us closer to realizing life goals (“there is no bad that won’t bring some good”, “through hardships to the stars”, etc.).

Crystallized identity means, among others, perceiving oneself as an integral subject in the context of passing time. However, at the same time representatives of the narrative approach in social sciences emphasize that identity is achieved by providing meaning to their own experiences. Trzebiński (2002, p. 37) expresses it as follows: “The sense of narrative identity and its stability is not due to the permanency of one’s own attributes, but due to an understandable course of a story that is important for the individual, which he experiences and within which he understands his characteristics, including their variability, and has a good understanding of his actions, motives and reactions of others to him”.

The stories told by people are a kind of subjective interpretation of events. How we perceive a given event affects our previous experiences, knowledge, opinions and attitudes. The story, i.e. constructing a narrative about the world, has a very important function – it is an attempt to “tame” a given fragment of reality, and thus, it gives control over the environment (Dryll 2010). Emotions are also an important layer of narration. In the course of interacting with other

people, we can share our emotions, but – what is equally important – we learn to recognize and express emotions. “Events become understandable when we see them in the perspective of thoughts, feelings, desires and intentions of active subjects that strive towards something, fear something, misinterpret something, and all of this takes place in a specific time and circumstances” (Oleś 2008, p. 38).

The knowledge of an individual about himself is also a form of narrative. The narrative scheme which is a “dramaturgical model of a particular sphere of the world” (Trzebiński 2001, p. 95) is considered to be a kind of structure that represents reality, and at the same time a system of rules of interpreting its specific area. The narrative scheme includes characters of the story, their beliefs, intentions and plans of achieving specific goals; it also refers to complications arising in the course of actions and the conditions for overcoming them (Trzebiński 2001, p. 95).

Constructing self-narrative has a deep psychological meaning. It should be discussed in the context of three groups of needs (Oleś 2008). The purposes of integration, providing orientation in the world and a sense of cohesion of the individual, include the need to understand events, continuity and consistency. Social needs is a need to share experiences and the need to participate; the satisfaction of these needs enables one to lead a creative life, and additionally one that is full of social identifications. Finally, identity needs (self-determination, uniqueness and giving life meaning) are those that relate to the sphere of values and giving meaning to existence (Trzebiński 2001, p. 39–41).

Narratives and criminality

As David Canter points out (1994), one of the supporters and precursors of the narrative approach to the study of criminal narratives, the use of the narrative method enables one to better understand the motivation of criminals and recognize the importance of the offenses for their perpetrators. These two aspects – motivation and meaning – make up the emergence of criminal intent. Therefore, in getting to know narration, we get closer to getting to know the essence of criminal activities.

Canter’s narrative approach, developed in recent years, along with Donna Youngs (2011, 2013), is based on the concept of Northrop Frye’s archetypes (1957) and the previously mentioned Dan McAdams’ theory of narrative identity. In referring to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Frye assumes that the stories always take the form of one of the four “mythical archetypes”: comedy, romance, tragedy or irony. Youngs and Canter (2011) argue that the concept of narrative can be operationalized, using the term “role”. They treat “narrative roles” as manifestations of certain topics of offenders’ life narratives, in a specific criminal situation. The

application of the research tool for studying narrative developed by them (NRQ – *Narrative Roles Questionnaire*) made it possible to isolate the isolation of the four main criminal roles. These are: Hero, Victim, Professional and Revenger. Each of them contains cognitive, affective and identity elements (Youngs and Canter 2011, 2013).

Lois Presser (2009, p. 179) believes that narratives are “key causal factors”, contributing to understanding of the aspect “here and now” of the crime. The author lists several, the most important according to her, benefits of using the concept of narrative in the analysis of criminality – the ability to: (1) refer it to acts of perpetrators and witnesses of the crime; (2) apply it in terms of both individual and group; (3) better – thanks to it – understanding of the criminal subculture; (3) go beyond the concept of criminality as a rational activity⁴; (4) easily acquire data on crime, without avoiding questions about its essence (Presser 2009). Of course, Presser’s calculation is difficult to regard as exhaustive, if only because it ignores that such advantages of the narrative approach as an opportunity to learn the convictions of perpetrators, important in view of committing the crime and his motives (cf. Piotrowski, Florek 2014, p. 53).

Narrative studies in criminology cover many aspects of criminality. These include, among others, the analyses of: criminal narrative content (Toroń 2013), the relationship of perpetrators on specific categories of offenses (Hochstetler et al. 2010), the so-called social narrative on crime (Kappeler, Potter 2014), the narrative of victims of crimes (Jägervi 2014) and narratives indicating the specifics of the process of withdrawing from crime (Farrall 2012).

Studies on narratives being the basis of so-called *deviant talk* show that a broad spectrum of beliefs, reactions and attitudes come into play, which increase the likelihood of deviant involvement. Sussman (2005) lists several issues of this kind of narrative, focusing on those that occur during peer interaction: discussion about “being bad” (theft, drug use, violence), “bad behavior” (obscene gestures, vulgarity) and the positive reactions to the violation of norms (laughter, encouraging others). Preoccupying minors with this type of narrative increases the risk of them stepping onto the path of crime in adulthood (Borders, Dishion 2003).

Wojtczak (2014) points out in his paper that one of the characteristic aspects of criminal narratives are superstitions shared by perpetrators. Of the 121 convicted who participated in the studies, nearly 3/4 indicated that they were familiar with at least one superstition that functions in the criminal environment. 12% of respondents admitted that the crime they committed was related to a professed

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⁴ We are convinced that it is impossible to agree with the thesis that the study of criminal narratives promotes going beyond the “tangible and rational” approach to crime, much less the thesis that moving towards a pointless and irrational approach is something useful in science. The author was probably referring to the use of the neo-positivistic paradigm, coupled with the denial of *raison d’être* of other methodological approaches.

superstition, while 36% of convicts stated that the offender's knowledge about a given superstition may cause them not to commit a crime (Wojtczak 2014).

John Laub and Robert Sampson (2003), based on the studies conducted, determined that the "turning points" on the road of departing from crime could be: starting a family, taking up a permanent job and stopping substance abuse. Very important also – created during this process – are modifications of the life narrative. The positive image of "Self" increases the level of "resistance" to the influence of criminal subculture (cf. Piotrowski, Florek 2014b).

Of course, if we analyze the process of departing from crime in the context of changing the image of "Self", it should be assumed that – from the psychological point of view – a key aspect of positive changes will be to build a mature ego sphere. According to Grzegorek (2003, p. 222): "The complexity of the narrative depends on the level of development of the ego; the lower this level, the easier is the way in which categorization of reality takes place; therefore, the plots in the story will be clear and simple, understanding oneself, as well as others black and white" (Grzegorek 2003, p. 222). The problem of a kind of "cognitive indolence", characteristic especially for the cognitive functioning of repeat offenders is also the important in the context of the criminal thinking concept by Glenn Walters (1990, 2006).

Maruna (2001) also points to the potential possibilities of using the narrative concept in estimating the probability of an individual withdrawing from criminal activities. McNeill (2012) emphasizes that stopping criminal activities is the result of external factors – changes to the living situation and growing importance of bonds with non-criminal environments, and internal – modifying the criminal narrative.

Criminological research also apply to public discourse on criminality. For example, Kappeler and Potter (2014) indicate the existence of "neutralizing myths" on corporate crime. According to the media narrative dominant in the USA, shared by politicians and so-called average citizens, the biggest threat to the country is common "street" crime. In fact, violations of the law committed by the largest corporations involve much more serious losses. At the same time they are treated incomparably more leniently by the courts. The authors cite, for example, FBI data, according to which the total "cost" of street crime in the USA in 2002 was 16.6 billion dollars. For comparison: losses of the American economy arising from the bankruptcy of the energy company Enron, which took place in December 2001, was estimated at 60 billion dollars.

The therapeutic aspect of the narrative approach

Renaissance of the narrative approach in psychology resulted in, among others, the development of narrative therapy by White and Epsom (1990). Its theoretical basis is the idea that people give meaning to life by organizing their experien-

ces within narratives embedded in specific cultural contexts (Hannen and Woods 2012). The narratives constructed and reconstructed in interactions with other people and messages of a cultural nature shape the sense of individual identity, its way of perceiving the world and future actions. Due to the cultural and interpersonal nature of the narrative it is possible to produce many alternative narratives associated with a given problem in the specific situation of the individual. If only one dominates, stressing deficits of the individual, a *problem saturated story* is created, which interferes with his life.

Narrative therapy is designed to allow the client to detect such pathologic stories and to help in creating alternative stories (Hannen and Woods 2012), which – in changing the way you think about yourself – are to become the starting point towards a positive change in behavior. It is difficult to determine the efficacy of this therapy, because in fact, aside from reports on individual cases, no research has as yet been conducted in this area. In the context of the narrative studies on causes of crime discussed above, it seems that using it in relation to perpetrators may bring positive results. We also believe that the analysis of the narrative, allowing you to identify the criminal's convictions about himself and the world, can be used as a basis of cognitive-oriented therapy, whose effectiveness in social rehabilitation has been confirmed by numerous studies.

The fundamental advantage of this approach is – in our opinion – that the narratives reveal not only those beliefs of criminals that he is able to *explicitly* express, but also those that – to some extent – are hidden and can be picked up only in the context of his other statements, as their logical implications. Because criminals find it difficult to verbalize them, e.g. due to limited language competence, he/she will not reveal them during questionnaire type studies or during an interview; however, they will be identifiable during a precise analysis of his/her narrative.

Analysis of the narrative enables to separate convictions forming the “Self” structure, which contribute to committing offenses and are patently false. They can be eliminated through rational argumentation and referring to the facts. A particular class of false beliefs are beliefs about (lack of) control over oneself, which are often a rationalization of criminal activity, which – as evidenced by study results – are clearly correlated with immoral actions and probably to some extent cause these actions (cf. Piotrowski, Florek 2014b).

Therapeutic activities of this type, based on identification in the narratives of false beliefs and their elimination will have a negative effect – they can be described as elenctic in reference to the method used by Socrates, and also used in cognitive therapy. It should be supplemented by treatments of a positive – maieutic nature, helping to acquire new beliefs about oneself, which will become the basis for a new narrative. It should be preceded by the identification of the criminal's convictions about his/her features, constituting the concept of “Self”, which are important in the context of fulfilling socially acceptable roles and may

give rise to delineate a path of social rehabilitation, consistent with the criminal's sense of identity.

Equally important is the separation of beliefs about the world, whose consequence is taking up criminal activities, and then making a critical evaluation of them during therapy sessions. In our opinion, the elimination of beliefs consistent with the deterministic vision of reality (cf. Florek, Piotrowski 2014) is of particular importance. If we assume that the impact of social rehabilitation should aim for a situation where the prisoner will be ready to responsibly and constructively participate in social life, one of the most significant changes should concern questioning his/her previous convictions, which form the so-called "street code" (Kennedy 2010). The rules used by long-term offenders also concern the emphasis of the importance of intra-group loyalty, absolute prohibition of cooperating with police and the need to respond aggressively to any insult. This "elenctic" approach to inappropriate beliefs of criminals about the world should be supplemented, as in the case of beliefs about "Self", by the maieutic approach, based on the presentation of alternative, positive narratives about the social reality that will become the basis for the criminal in acquiring beliefs motivating for constructive and socially acceptable activities.

The narrative approach to crime has undoubtedly many advantages. However, there are certain limitations involved, which can be seen in the context of contemporary studies on moral psychology, which challenge the traditional model of moral cognition. This model assumes that it has a conscious and mostly cognitive character, and – as it seems – is also adopted on the basis of a narrative approach which recognizes that it is conscious content that determines actions. It turns out, however, that moral evaluation of action and activity are often conditioned by intuition – based on unconscious and affect-laden processes of processing information by the mind, and conscious motives and justifications are merely their rationalization. Such a model of moral cognition was presented by Jonathan Haidt (2001) in an article of the evocative title *Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: a Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment*. This model is supported by studies using modern imaging methods of imaging the functioning of the central nervous system. However, we think (cf. Piotrowski, Florek 2014b) that this limit can be tried to overcome in the spirit of Dennett heterophenomenology – by supplementing the classical narrative method with monitoring the "non-semantic" dimension of the narrative (the formal aspects of the customer's statements: tone of voice, facial expressions, etc., and even activation of the nervous system), whose objective will be to establish affective arousal accompanying pronouncements. The detection of inconsistencies involving non-compliance of content with its affective background may be the basis for searching for its sources together with the offender of the crime and constructing narratives whose contents will be consistent with the affect accompanying them.

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