Uncovering Validity Criteria for Stories Managers Hear and Tell

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Abstract: Policymakers and managers rely to a large extent on stories told to them for information that shapes problem formulation and decision. But what can give them confidence in such stories? In this article, one of several articles by the author in which the value of stories is examined, the social origins of validity standards for storytelling. Based on sociological theory regarding the construction of social reality, the author argues that four questions typically are asked when the validity of a story is to be tested.

Scientists have argued that knowledge acquired by plunging preconceived hypotheses into reality and testing the result is to be accepted because it meets standards of validity. Knowledge acquired by other methods does not meet these same standards and is not considered valid by analytic scientists (McCurdy & Cleary, 1984). The scientists' judgment deprecates the storytelling involved in the recounting of recalled experience or the writing and reporting of case studies so prevalent in public administration media today (Perry & Kraemer, 1986). However, philosophers of science (Kant, 1787/1965; Heidegger, 1962/1967) along with a leading social science methodologist (Weber, 1922/1968b) have argued that the object to be investigated must first be constituted before it is scientifically analyzed.

Elsewhere (Hummel, 1989, 1990), I have tried to show that the way people constitute objects, including those for scientific analysis, is to talk about them—in effect, to tell each other stories. In the management literature, this is reflected in the recounting of recalled experience and in case studies. Storytelling appears to be central to constituting reality: describing its structure and content and narrating events in it. Telling a story about a problem engages the trust and commitment of listeners more than mere information giving does,¹ a fact not lost on anyone working in an organization. For example, state agency officials who make policy decisions in all 50 American states obtain most of their information from their peers in other state agencies or from federal agencies, newspapers, and the governor's office rather than from research organizations or from university faculty (Lester & Webber, 1990, p. 13).

Storytelling may be the necessary medium without which reality could not be constructed—a point made as early as 1976 by Rein in regard to the problem of fitting scientific facts into a familiar context for the purpose of policy formulation (Rein, 1976). When physicist Richard Feynman dropped a piece of O-ring from the space shuttle into a glass of ice water at the hearings of the Rogers Commission to demonstrate that rubber does not easily spring back to close a seal at freezing temperatures which might occur during the launching of a spacecraft, he provided the raw material for a story that was widely disseminated in the media that made the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle understandable to laymen.

In the field of administration, it has been reported empirically (Aguilar, 1967; Mintzberg, 1973) that much of what constitutes a problem for managers comes in the form of a story that someone else tells them. For example, in a staff meeting, a planner discusses an anticipated review of a local project, saying

DEC (a state environmental agency) is so understaffed and underpersoned that I'd presume their review is going to be relatively perfunctory. I think they're going to rely to a great extent on representations of the environmental consultants. The people on our committee don't trust any of this stuff. There are certain of them who really don't trust it, others who are just a little nervous. I guess I'm the least nervous about this.²

To the extent that the planner's story about the review agency is accepted, it shapes the boundaries and content of the problem as perceived by those whom the planner addresses. Note that this brief story reveals something (1) about the storyteller, (2) about others, and (3) about their relationship; ultimately it must reveal something that (4) rings true to the listeners. The purpose of the present exploration is to demonstrate how these four points can be justified as validity standards for stories.

In short, the story brings new knowledge from the real world into the confines of our understanding of that world as based on already existing concepts or theories about the world. What can make that knowledge valid?

The essential function of the story in connecting our minds to what is real is explored by those who most deeply investigate the underlying conditions that produce knowledge: philosophers of science. A story invites us to expand our knowledge to new experience, what Kant (1787/1965) called "synthesis" between concepts and experience. Traditionally, stories have constituted what Heidegger (1954/1978; 1962/1967) called the "thing," the field within which we become involved with others in a "state of affairs." And stories establish what Weber (1968a) called the *Deutung*, or meaning determination of an event, by placing an event in a context.³

In both policy formulation and management, raw scientific data cannot become accepted into policymakers' or managers' realities unless these data are first given a place in the unfolding story of policymaking and managing.

The Need for Validity Criteria

How can policymakers or managers tell whether the contents of a story told are valid or not? Certainly science has clear and well-established validity standards that give confidence in scientific information. But are there validity criteria for storytelling just as there are validity criteria for science?

This question takes on ultimate importance when we consider Kant's warning, in speaking of synthesis as the key to all knowing, that "without such combination nothing can be thought or known" (Kant B138). Establishment of validity criteria for stories also would satisfy Weber's (1962/1968b, p. 70) critique of science, which is that even when a rule can be developed upon which behavior can be calculated in advance, one would nevertheless have advanced "not a step" in the direction of understanding the meaning of what is going on. This relates directly to a typical problem of managers: having access to scientific studies but being unable to judge their relevance because the rules of behavior found in the study do not alone enable anyone to judge whether and how they fit a situation.

Clearly, criteria for the satisfactory constitution of an object must differ from criteria suitable for judging satisfactory analysis. In the story, reality is created; in scientific analysis, it is broken apart.

The test to which a story that has been created or that is in the process of being created must stand up is whether or not the listener can give a positive answer to the question, Does this make sense to me?

This question leads to an even larger concern for whether the storyteller and the hearer of the story can agree on *what it is* that from then on will constitute the object of any further discussion, including any later scientific analysis. In short, the overall validity test for a story that constructs a reality is whether those telling and hearing it can *agree* on a viable reality that is henceforth constituted by the story. Validity has a commitment dimension and a time dimension: Will those now engaged by the story commit themselves to treating the reality so defined as their joint reality thereafter? Much of this hinges on viability: Does the story allow them to construct a reality within which they can live? Thus the question is not only "Can we agree on reality?" but "Can we stand it?"

Marshall Dimmock (1986, p. 5), referring to this approach as "the synthesis school," expressed the belief that "the creative person is the one who is most skilled at including all the factors, and especially the psychological ones, and coming forth with a conclusion that is better than others because it stands the test of time."

Differences Between the Conduct of Science and the Conduct of Life

Agreement on living out a reality established by mutual storytelling is by no means arbitrary, and those agreeing cannot afford to be sanguine about their commitment. Such situations as the management of organizations are a matter of the immediate living of a real life in contrast to abstract situations such as the design of scientific inquiry in which researchers' lives are detached

from their immediate survival interests. The participants in the construction of an object or of relevant reality at large are very much conscious that there are personal penalties, not just professional ones, for an inappropriate definition of what is going on. Appropriate definition, literally a definition proper to the object, allows one to so grasp an object that the grasping of it leads participants to desired outcomes because it is true to the inner nature of the object or the reality. When those involved in the constructing of an object or reality also are participants in it, this means that the definition of what is going on also must be true, as Dimmock (1986) perceived, to the inner nature of the participants themselves. The validity question becomes the viability question, "If we agree on defining reality in this, our, way, can we live with it?" In the absence of such agreement an object or larger reality cannot be socially defined nor confidence in its viability won.

Social Origins of Validity Standards

What can reasonably serve as a simple yet essential, elegant yet practicable model for deciding whether or not any particular story, as definition of an object or a reality, is valid? Here, one can consult the literature of those who have investigated how people construct social reality. For example, Weber (1968a, 1922/1968b), Schutz (1964, 1965, 1966), and Berger and Luckmann (1967) can be argued to have established the same elements of the construction of social reality. From the configuration of these it becomes relatively easy to suggest that individual listeners will accept a story—that is, the object defined by a story—on the same grounds as they will accept the social construction of reality in general.

Here, I will proceed to recall briefly four elements of the social construction of reality mentioned earlier and translate these into four types of validity questions. Validity questions are questions of confidence that must be asked by a listener concerned with how a story—and the reality it constructs—will stand up to future attempts to deal with it.

The kind of object that is constructed in the social science most directly concerned with the social construction of reality—interpretive sociology—is an object called "social action" or "social relationship" (Weber, 1968a, pp. 4, 22, 26). Either object involves the actions of at least one individual oriented toward another individual. So, for example, Weber (1968a) wrote, "The term 'social relationship' will be used to denote the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms," (p. 26) and added, "Thus, as a defining criterion, it is essential that there should be at least a minimum of mutual orientation of the action of each to that of the others" (p. 27).

Similarly, phenomenological sociology takes as the elements of a social relationship communication between at least one *I* and one *thou* within the context of a shared stock of knowledge and with mutual intentionality (Schutz, 1964, 1966, 1967; Hummel, 1977, p. 6).

From both the Weberian and the Schutzian approach, Isaak and Hummel (1975, p. 286) concluded that the minimal elements of social experience cannot be any less than:

At least two individuals
 each with intentions (goals)
 engaging in interaction to make real these intentions
 and deriving meaning from understanding each other's intentions.
 This mutual understanding becomes the social reality of these two
 individuals.⁴

Similarly, though with important differences, Heidegger's (1927/1976, pp. 28, 34) injunction that an object be approached in such a way that it can speak for itself leads to an even clearer understanding of how a social object comes into being. A social object is what is created when a partner is addressed in a manner in which the partner can freely engage in defining what is to be talked about. The state of affairs that is termed here as a *social object* is called a *thing* by Heidegger (1962/1967, 1954/1978). Recovering the meaning of thing etymologically, Heidegger (1962/1967, pp. 4-5; 1954/1978, pp. 166-167) distinguished thing from mere physical object by tracing back the word to its old Germanic meaning: a tribal gathering. At such a gathering, an issue was brought up or a state of affairs was formulated and decided.

Now, the minimal definition of the elements of experience within which a thing can be brought up or constituted can be addressed. No object can be defined, no reality constructed, and no thing assembled unless there are at least two individuals and interaction between them on a given subject. The construction of reality is true when each individual addresses the other so that the other can respond in the other's own terms and, if there is a physical object involved, when both address the physical object in terms of its own physical limits and potential. The result of the mutual presence of these two individuals and their querying and responding on a subject of mutual interest creates and maintains their joint experience. The Romans called this *res* (for example, when the thing was public, they called it *res publica*), and the thing at issue or contested was termed the *causa*. In Italian, *causa* becomes *cosa* (as in the modern Italian *cosa nostra* or "our thing"). In French it is *chose*, as in Durkheim's statement "*Les faites sociaux sont des choses.*" And from the old high German to modern English, reality assembled survives as *thing*.

Graphically, the elements of the experience of life as it is constructed as something real, a real thing, or a reality can be depicted as follows:

It is the interaction between self and an other that establishes what is between them—something that *is* as a *thing between: inter-esse*. Something of this meaning survives in English when people say they have a mutual interest. *I* and an *other* establish a state in which there is something between them that both have created and that enfolds them: the thing, a reality. In politics or law or battle this is still called a cause: one has a cause, pleads a cause, fights for a cause one has in common with others.

Without the commitment of both *I* and other, without the proper address that engages committed and free response of the other in the other's own terms, what is between them falls apart or, rather, can never come to be for them.

Standards for reality construction are really conditions (in the sense of conditions: that which is said together). If one wanted to check whether these conditions were met, one logically would have to ask:

- (1) Is there a committed ego?
- (2) Is there a committed other?
- (3) Is the interaction appropriate to both—does one address the other as if the other were one's self (Kant, 1787/1965) or so that the other can respond in the other's own terms (Heidegger, 1962/1967, 1954/1978) or so that the address takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course (Weber, 1968a, 1922/1968b)?
- (4) Is there a sense that the whole hangs viably together—a sense of coherence?

What questions must be answered if a story told by an other to a listener—for example, by an employee asking a manager for leave because his mother has died—is to stand up to validity criteria of construing a story?

Construing Reality—Validity Standards for Stories People Tell

One believes what one already knows. Even scientists engaged in research accept only what they already know: only that which can be considered as data fits into the framework of the preconceived hypothesis.⁵ A request for leave because of a mother's death must be similarly couched in terms of "leave" and "mothers"; it cannot be about neologisms such as *umpleg* and *kador*, as in "I would like umpleg because my kador has died." Beyond having the words for an event, there are other conceptual conditions that make an event plausible; for example, one's experience being that leaves are normally granted with mothers die. But surely the question must be why one believes something that one does not already know—how one can admit to knowledge of something for which one does not already have concepts. Or, if scientists are limited to knowing only what has already been hypothesized, had there not better be a method of coming to know that which is not already known?

Fortunately, scientific procedure itself provides a clue. It is not that scientists know ahead of time the actual location in space and time and the intensity of what can fall into the categories of an hypothesis—the two

propositions to be tested and their posited correlational or causal relationship. The scientist assumes knowledge of only the categories within which something posited ahead of time will be allowed to show itself. Permitted are data available to the senses, data that can be located as appearing in time and space with a certainty intensity or magnitude, and data that fall within the parameters of predescription that define a specific hypothesis. In short, scientists accept what falls within the categories of looking and relating with which they are familiar.

One may be excused for supposing a similar predisposition toward the categorically familiar when one comes to answering the question of how ordinary people come to believe something that is unfamiliar in content. The answer to this, in fact, was suggested by a parks and recreation manager (Hummel, 1990, p. 9) who was asked about what could be learned from the story of an other dealing with an entirely different world of work: "You're looking for somebody that has the, that shares—this is a contradiction in terms—that shares a unique experience." Certainly, the content of a unique experience must seem strange to the listener. What, then, can sound familiar enough to be shared? The answer must be that the structure of life represented in the story is congruent with the experience of life in general.

If something new is to be believed, it must fit within previously available structures of experience.

The scientist's standard of empiricity derives from that part of the hypothesis structure that is a proposition. There are two propositions, minimally, in every hypothesis. Each asserts a fact. The proposition as a statement of asserted fact is then plunged into reality and tested. Similarly, the scientist's standard of causality derives from that element of the hypothesis in which the two propositions are related to each other: the statement supposing causality. Of late, many scientists have satisfied themselves with the standard of correlation when causality is supposed to be too difficult to prove.

The listener to a story or the reader of a case has and applies validity standards to what is offered as potential knowledge in exactly the same way that the hypothesizing scientist has and applies validity standards. One can expect to find that, just as the scientist's standards are derived from the categories of the hypothesis, the standards of the manager required to act on a story an employee tells will be based on the categories of everyday (managerial) life. Unless a new event can be made to fit such categories, it will not be understood. Or, unless old categories can be widened to adapt to a new event, the old model of reality will remain inadequate to the new event. That such mutual adaptation of concepts to experience and experience to concepts can take place at all, so that new things are learned, is explained by Kant (1787/1965) in his discussion of synthesis.

Questions to Serve as Validity Standards

From where, then, do people in everyday life derive the standards for judging the validity of new knowledge offered in stories? In general, such solution as Kant's on synthesis must be accepted; namely, that one would be

blind to reality without prior concepts and that one's prior concepts would remain empty without being filled with experience. In short, within general categorical limits, one's picture of the world adapts to the world, and the world must be able to fit into one's picture. In sociological terms, as suggested earlier, people will accept a story on the same grounds that they accept the experience of reality construction in general. It is now clear that reality construction in part rests on what at least one partner in the process of construction tells the other. In short, reality construction, conceived as a field that becomes something that is between I and another, depends in part on one's acceptance of the story the other tells (see Searle, 1969, p. 47).⁶

This may seem an abstract point, but it is very real, as can be illustrated by looking at any management situation in which a manager is asked to make up his or her mind as to what is going on based on a story that an employee tells. Consider the employee approaching the manager, saying: "My mother has died; I need time off." On what basis should the manager judge the validity of this story?

On the basis of the elements on which reality is constructed, the manager's construing of this story would involve judgments on four points:

1. Self.
2. Other.
3. Relationship between the two.
4. Coherence of 1 through 3—that is, of the whole story.

In real life, studies have shown (Agor, 1989) that the entire scene is canvassed in one fell swoop: a single sweep of intuition. Being committed to the analytical understanding of the acceptance of stories told, however, one may ask what questions would have to be answered to give a listener confidence in the validity of the story so it can be used for the foremost cognitive purpose of life (Kant, B135, B137, B139)⁷—without which any further analysis is impossible—for the further construction of reality: solutions, responses, designs, and the like.

If judging a story is based on its structural congruence with the categories of life experience in general, one can ask of a story told:

1. Is the story told in such a way that the listener is able to put on the storyteller's shoes?
2. Does the relationship established between the storyteller and the object(s) of the story have any resemblance with the kind of relationship that one would expect from the storyteller's, others', or one's own relationship to similar objects?
3. Is the storyteller acting in character or does the storyteller's behavior point to unfamiliar and therefore untrustworthy aspects of the storyteller's personality?
4. Does the whole story ring true, does it hang together, does it produce a sense of coherence in the listener?

Acceptance of the validity of the employee's story will rest on whether the story is something the manager can identify with (How would I want to be treated if *my* mother died?), whether the deep relationship between mother and son implied is typical in the culture, whether the manager knows from previous experience that the employee generally does take deaths of relatives seriously,

whether the judgments on the preceding three items produce a coherent whole.⁸

Ontologically, positive answers to these questions contribute to the sense that the world, as so far constructed, is not about to fall apart. The extension of the knowledge that is offered in the story can be integrated into not only the familiar structures of one's life experience but into the specific meanings with which those specific structures of *this* individual's or *that* manager's life experience are endowed.

Developing related criteria on another theoretical basis, critical theorist John Forester (1980, pp. 329-330) wrote that some such norms of pragmatic communication "are usually taken for granted. They are part of the subtle foundations of common sense. If we violate them, we are confronted by confusion, mistrust, anger, and disbelief. As these pragmatic norms are broken, our shared experience and our social world and political world disintegrate." In short, when stories do not meet criteria of coherently maintaining or expanding the world that the communal sense of what is real has already established, they actually threaten to dismantle one's world rather than help constitute it. It is out of this danger that one may expect listeners to impose criteria on the story told as hard-headedly as scientists impose criteria on data elicited.

Response to a Possible Scientific Objection

An objection may be raised that the criteria raised merely constitute standards of internal identification and coherence, not an external standard of truth. This objection is valid if the thing about which a truth is sought is a physical thing. If it is such a thing, it is of course available to the five senses and thence to an empirical/hypothetical approach and scientific/rationalist analysis. If, however, the thing to be established is to be included in a "state of affairs" rather than simply considered theoretically as an isolated physical object, then the objection is valid only to the extent that a physical object must be given its due even as it becomes part of the thing to be established. It would then be possible to add an additional question:

5. Is it likely that a physical object such as described in a story might exist?

This is a question that might well have been asked by the manager who rejected the engineer's tentative findings that O-rings on the space shuttle Challenger might fail under low launch temperatures. But this question cannot be asked without reference to the first four questions any more than it is possible to understand statistical data without first establishing the meaning of what the statistics are about (Weber), combining concepts with experience in synthesis (Kant), or establishing the thing (Heidegger). In social talk, managerial problem-solving, and policy formulation, the thing that is to be talked about as a state of affairs must first be defined before physical factors can be given their place in the discussion. In this fact lies much of the explanation for why good science is often rejected in policy discussions (Lester and Webber, 1990): if the science cannot fit into what is being constituted by being talked

about, it cannot become part of the reality being constituted. In the words of Wittgenstein (1921/1961, p. 150), On that which one cannot talk about, one must be silent.⁹ Only once things meet the conditions and validity standards of public discourse are they perceived as realities capable and worthy of further manipulation.

Notes

¹For example, juries tend to lend more credence to words uttered by a witness in a narrative style than to the same information presented in a nonnarrative manner, according to a research group headed by anthropologist William O'Barr of Duke University ("Verdicts Linked" 1975, p. 88).

²Story provided by reviewer John Forester, Department of City and Regional Planning, Cornell University, in urging the use of ministories to illustrate the theoretical points that are the basis of this article.

³Weber (1968a, p. 12) wrote, "Statistical uniformities constitute understandable types of action, and thus constitute sociological generalizations, only when they can be regarded as manifestations of the understandable subjective meaning of a course of social action."

⁴Simpler and similar definitions were offered in subsequent work. In Hummel and Isaak, (1980, p. 324); for example, five elements required in any social relationship are listed:

1. Two discreet individuals,
2. each capable of orienting him/or herself to the other as if he or she were that other,
3. who share a common perception of a shared world,
4. who communicate about that world, and
5. who interact to gain or maintain control of that world.

(see also Hummel, 1982, pp. 44-46; Hummel, 1987, pp. 48-49).

⁵Heidegger (1967, p. 74) traced back to the Greek concept of *mathesis* this procedure of setting up a framework into which all that is to follow must fit; it is for this reason and not for reasons of measurement, he wrote, that scientific knowledge is in a most profound sense "mathematical."

⁶Searle (1969, p. 47) wrote: "If I am trying to tell someone something, then (assuming certain conditions are satisfied) as soon as he recognizes that I am trying to tell him something and exactly what it is I am trying to tell him, I have succeeded in telling it to him. Furthermore, unless he recognizes that I am trying to tell him something and what I am trying to tell him, I do not fully succeed in telling it to him." In short, the what of social reality cannot be uttered in the absence of at least two persons who address and listen to each other.

⁷Kant called the concept formation or synthesis in the consciousness of the observing individual the "supreme" (B135) and "first" (B139) principle of human understanding, "for without such combination nothing can be thought or known." (B137).

⁸These concerns are not meant to be exclusive. I am planning a thorough in-depth analysis of a longer story to illustrate the complexities of applying story standards.

⁹My retranslation.

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