

“Say Their Names”: Uncovering A “Good Story” Among Protestors

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Abstract

Katherine Bischoping and Amber Gazso (2016) use the notion of a “good story” to evaluate how successfully the storyteller conveys their message to the reader. The goal of this observational reflection paper is to explore whether the same criteria of good storytelling (i.e., good reportability, good liveability, good coherence, and good fidelity) can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of narratives told by prisoner rights protestors. I draw on my firsthand experience of a protest outside the Central East Correctional Facility in Lindsay, Ontario to develop my evaluation and conclude that the stories I observed can be analyzed using this criterion.

Keywords

protest; prison; narrative analysis; storytelling

Introduction

For some people, it may seem unreasonable or even downright ridiculous that prisoners would advocate for themselves through acts of “disobedience” that highlight the inhumane and unconstitutional practices that characterize carceral spaces. However, criminality does not exempt anyone from their legal right to not be subjected to cruel and unusual treatment or punishment. Nor does it omit their civil right to equal protection and benefit of the law without discrimination.¹ Yet prisoners, due to their vulnerability and the power imbalances within carceral institutions, are exposed to increased marginalization and oppression. In order to retain some level of legal agency, while also bringing awareness to their systemic mistreatment, prisoners sometimes engage in acts of rebellion and resistance. Further, in an attempt to demonstrate community solidarity with those on the inside, prisoner rights advocates and family members will often host rallies and protests outside correctional centers. As the family member of a previously imprisoned loved one, I make every attempt to support prisoner-led activism and document the presence of this important work within my lived geography of southern Ontario.

Over the past year, I have noticed how storytelling has been effectively used at protests across the city of Toronto, Ontario, where I live, as well as within the province and country, writ large, to convey messages and garner support for a number of political causes. As a result, I decided to explore the technique in the context of prison protests using Katherine Bischooping and Amber Gazso’s (2016) notion of a “good story” to frame my analysis. According to Bischooping and Gazso, the storyteller is an author, producing a plot that conveys the meaning of the story; they are the story’s performer, responsible for animating it into the world (p. 107). Bischooping and Gazso further establish that for a story to be “good”, it must meet a particular criterion: it should have good reportability, good liveability, good coherence, and good fidelity. Their criteria are useful as they enable researchers to reflect on how these common ideas about what constitutes a “good” story may also shape

their interview processes and the resultant data (p. 107). Accordingly, I draw on their criterion of “good story-telling” to explore how effectively protestors advocating for the rights of prisoners communicate their concerns, focusing, in particular, on a rally I attended in Lindsay, Ontario in the summer of 2020.

Observations

On June 27, 2020, I conducted observational research at a prisoners’ rights rally hosted by the Toronto Prisoners’ Rights Project, which is a volunteer organization run by former prisoners, people with loved ones inside, local activists, and other allies, who engage in direct action to shed light on the harms caused by incarceration, while also connecting prisoners with necessary resources.² The rally I attended was held outside Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay, a city on the Scugog River in the Kawartha Lakes region of southeastern Ontario, Canada. The rally was held in support of 100 prisoners at the facility who were on a hunger strike. The purpose of the protest was to:

Demand justice for all prisoners, former prisoners, and their communities; to hear from family members about their loss; amplify prisoner-led activism, demand mental health supports and reject criminalization; and connect our advocacy to current movements for police and prison accountability, defunding, and abolition (“Rally for Prisoner Justice,” 2020).

The prisoners were protesting inhumane living conditions and had several demands, including:

Free phone calls and more phones, personal visits, access to clean drinking water, access to gym and yard time, end to lockdowns, access to books and programming, clean air and hygienic living conditions, quality nutritious food for all, religious and dietary accommodations, television access, clean clothing, shoes, and toiletries (ibid).

¹ *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, s 15, Part 1 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982

² *Toronto Prisoners Rights Project*, 2021.

I attended the protest with the founder of *Think Twice*, who was scheduled to speak at the event. Founded in 2006, *Think Twice* is a community-based organization that “provides trauma-informed, culturally sensitive programming that aims to reduce gun violence throughout the Greater Toronto Area through non-traditional harm reduction projects in racialized communities and federal correctional institutions.”³ As one of the first community-based organizations led by individuals who have lived experiences involving the Canadian carceral system, *Think Twice* is well recognized and highly respected for the programs they facilitate within Ontario jails and prisons. It was my first time returning to the jail since my partner’s release on May 27, 2009. The drive to the institution brought back many difficult and pleasant memories. I recalled being pulled over by police in Lindsay on my way to pick my partner up after his five-and-a-half-year prison sentence and feeling upset with myself that I might be late. I did not want him to think that I wasn’t coming. But I also recalled how amazing it felt to finally see him and embrace him in the free world after more than half a decade of hugs and kisses under carceral surveillance.

Lindsay, Ontario, which is approximately 132.9 km from Toronto, is a small, rural, and predominantly white European-Canadian town. As we approached the road leading up to the facility, I noticed that it was blocked off by two black police SUV’s. I approached the officers to let them know we were attending the rally and they allowed us to pass the barricade. As we got closer to the protestors, I noticed that the other end of the road had also been blocked off by police and there was another SUV blocking the entrance to the jail’s parking lot. Needless to say, they knew we were coming.

On the street outside the facility, there was a crowd of approximately 40-50 protestors. Some had signs, and others were wearing t-shirts with names or pictures printed on them. The demographics of the protest were diverse. There were adults present from various ethno-racial backgrounds and age-groups. There were also tables set-up, providing information and free refreshments to protestors. Additionally, there was a coach bus parked at the side of the road, which I later found out was used to transport protestors (free of charge) from Toronto to Lindsay.

The protest was structured around individuals sharing stories of their imprisoned loved ones who had died while in custody. Protestors also spoke the names

of the people who they believed had died due to neglect and/or abuse at the hands of correctional staff. They chanted:

Justice for Jordan Sheard!
 Justice for Shawn Spaulding!
 Justice for Soleiman Faqiri!
 Justice for Justin St. Amour!
 Justice for Cas Geddes!
 Justice for Abdurahman Hassan!
 Justice for Moses Amik Beaver!
 Justice for Ashley Smith!
 Justice for Edward Snowshoe!

Reportability

Bischoping and Gazso (2016) describe a reportable story as one that the narrator can easily defend if they are asked “why” they are telling it. Phrased differently, a reportable story speaks to and encapsulates something that does not seem or feel right to most people, and, as a result, unsettles the presumed order of reason (p. 108). In the immediate context of the June 27th rally, the shared stories of imprisoned folk who have died while in custody satisfies this notion of reportability, as the individuals both narrating and listening to these stories were invested in the belief that all people, regardless of their criminality, have the right to be treated humanely; that they have a right to life. However, it could easily be argued by those who have not been directly impacted by the imprisonment of a loved one that failing to obey the law is enough to exempt someone from their constitutional right to fair and equal treatment. Accordingly, the “reportability” of these narratives varies depending on one’s positionality and their relationship to the criminal “justice” system.

Not all stories at the rally were told orally, some protestors used posters, artwork, and custom t-shirts to share the experiences of their loved ones. These “props” are indicative of the techniques used by a skillful narrator to “carry forward the plot at the same time as carrying along the audience’s interest” (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 110). Some protestors used chants during their narration, moments of silence, music, and collective activities, like honking car horns, to keep listeners engaged, which helped promote the reportability of their narratives and thus better spread their message and garner more support.

³ *About Think Twice*, 2020.

I was able to gauge whether those listening to the stories were invested by assessing how they gave feedback and showed their appreciation (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 110). During the protest, attendees would clap in solidarity while family members narrated the harms inflicted against their imprisoned loved ones. They would shout comments like “shame” or “do better” to critique the actions of correctional officers and administrators. This suggests that narrators effectively preformed their story in a way that kept the audience engaged. It also demonstrates that the stories being told aligned with, and supported, the purpose of the protest and that the audience recognized the relevance of the narrations. Moreover, the location of the protest seemed to reflect the attendee’s investment in the cause of prisoners’ rights. Unlike when attending a local protest in a major urban center where public transport is relatively accessible, the majority of the individuals in attendance at the event had travelled from the city of Toronto to the rural town of Lindsay, thereby indicating that they recognized the importance of the cause beforehand and were willing to sacrifice their time and gas in support of prisoners.

Liveability

According to Bischoping and Gazso (2016), a good story is typically understood to be a liveable one: a story that has a plot and argument that listeners can live with, in which the world being characterized is one that they can bear to live in (p. 111). However, from what I observed, it appears that the opposite is true in the case of prisoners’ rights protests. What kept listeners engaged was hearing the unlivable, unconstitutional, and unjust treatment of individuals residing in prisons and jails like the Central East Correctional Centre. The *un-liveability* of their stories challenge master narratives of jails as well-run government institutions. This is not to say that a good story that engages listeners with its un-livability cannot sometimes go too far, taking away from how it is perceived, as is the case when we see violence and human rights violations being sensationalized and mystified by the media. However, it does indicate that we, as sociologists and storytellers/listeners, need to re-examine the role that livability plays in the creation of a “good” story to include its diametrical other: *un-liveability*.

The stories that were told by the family members - the insiders – helped add a level of authenticity and validity to the protest while reigniting the passion of

attendees to fight for change. I observed many narrators becoming emotional while speaking of their deceased family members – some cried, some shouted, some paced back and forth. This behaviour can be seen as an example of how “we become discomposed when we lack publicly available language (or a master narrative) through which to compose and tell the story of an experience” (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 112). The social unacceptability and the stigmatizing residue of imprisonment makes it such that the experiences of those supporting their loved ones on the inside are often silenced. Hence, when presented with the opportunity to openly express their hurt, anger, sadness, and frustrations with the criminal “justice” system, it is easy and not surprising for individuals to be overcome with emotion, which, in turn, affects the emotions of those and the space around them.

One subtle yet powerful example of “discomposure” occurred during a conversation between a young woman whose brother had died in jail, and another protestor, who was their elder. The older protestor was looking at a poster the young woman had created in memory of her late brother. It was clear that a lot of time and effort had gone into its construction. At the top of the poster the young woman had written “*Till We Meet Again My Angle*” clearly misspelling the word “angel.” Before the older protestor could comment on the error (which she probably would not have), the young woman stated, “and I know that I spelled ‘angel’ wrong, but I’m not going to change it because it shows the state of mind I was in when I made this.” Here we can see how a lack of composure works to reinforce the trauma experienced by the family members of deceased prisoners, once again adding validity to the movement through un-liveability.

Coherence

The next criterion of a “good story” is that it be believable and coherent. Stories considered “bad” lack plots and/or performances and do not hold together for their listeners (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016). Bischoping and Gazso write: “consider how you as a listener/researcher can be implicated in incoherence and what the impact of that is” (p. 115). To illustrate their point, the two scholars provide an example of asylum seekers presenting incoherent narratives due to language barriers, which resonated with my experience at the protest. Incoherently performed narrations are “bad” stories because they

are difficult to follow and do not translate for the listeners. As regards the protest, I recall having difficulty connecting to one story in particular due to the narrator's difficulty with the English language.

Although neither French nor English were the narrator's first language, he spoke French with greater ease and used it more frequently. Being that I am not fluent in Canada's second official language, it was difficult for me to benefit from his narrative. My ignorance therefore contributed to his incoherence. I also noticed that during his narration, protestors were more active: visiting the refreshment stand, walking around, or socializing amongst themselves. This could suggest that other attendees had a similar difficulty comprehending his story. In contrast to this man's narrative, there was another story that stood out to me as particularly "good" and effective. It was narrated by Angela Vos, the mother of Jordan Sheard. It was her petite stature and emotional recount that captivated the protestors. I was so moved by her passion and pain that I approached her after the protest to thank her for her vulnerability and sharing her son's story with us. These two experiences illustrate the importance of coherence in "good" storytelling: in the first case, language barriers rendered the story incoherent and thus "bad", while in the second case, intense and heartfelt rhetoric rendered the story coherent and thus "good".

Fidelity

The final notion of a "good story" is fidelity, which emphasizes the importance of accounts that are "faithful to experience" (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 118). This is significant because "when we listen to a story, we make sense of it in part by unconsciously using as a baseline our experience with whatever genre the story seems to fit into, and with whatever case of characters that genre typically involves" (Ibid.). As an observer/listener, I found that my approach to the fidelity of prisoner rights narratives was anchored in the realm of realism, which emphasizes a grounded and stable perspective of social life, due to my ability to personally identify with the stories presented by the narrators and, more specifically, how they closely resembled my direct and indirect experiences with the carceral system.

Under the ontology of realism, a researcher can feel torn between a commitment to get participants to express their "truths" versus the commitment to weigh said "truths" against the collective (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 119). As regards the rally, I found myself observing how the narrations were being

received by other protestors. I used facial and bodily cues, such as facial expressions, voluntary engagement, and attentiveness, to gauge the fidelity of the story from their perspective as attendees. I noticed that, at times, attendees would shake their heads as if to disapprove of the behaviour of correctional staff. At other times, they shook their heads at the mention of Canada's contradictory ideals (i.e., freedom vs. criminalization), which seemed to signify a sort of disappointment in a country that treats prisoners unfairly, yet is globally celebrated as fair, safe, and forward-thinking. However, I often felt reluctant to conclude on the corresponding fidelity, or lack thereof, of the narratives being engaged. As Bischoping and Gazso point out, "researchers anchored in realism generally seek to understand what they mean, or do, for a listener, a narrator, or a community of narrators" (p. 119). Thus, during the rally, I was extremely cognizant of how my non-participatory observations were impacting the protest. Did I make anyone feel uncomfortable with my notetaking? Did my silence in anyway impact what the narrator said or how they said it? Did my presence compromise the data in any way? These questions gesture to the difficulty of truly observing the fidelity of a narrative from a "researcher" or otherwise "outsider" perspective.

Conclusion

Throughout my experiences of attending and participating in various protests across Toronto and nearby cities, I have seen different and unique strategies used by protestors to effectively convey their message. At the protest outside Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay, Ontario, stories were used to highlight the need for prison reform and/or abolition. Utilizing Bischoping and Gazso's (2016) notions of "good storytelling"; good reportability, good liveability, good coherence, and good fidelity, I was able to show that the stories told there, both orally and through other artforms, can be analyzed using these criteria. When collecting (and embodying) observations to write this reflection piece, I found it extremely difficult to refrain from participating in the protest given my close proximity to the cause. Yet, on the other hand, as a researcher, I felt a sense of duty to accurately report the data in its rawest and "truest" form, as I did not want to tarnish the memory of the deceased or misinterpret the trauma of their loved ones in anyway. To this extent, I do believe that I was successful.

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Author Biography

Melissa McLetchie is a PhD candidate of Caribbean dissent in the department of Sociology at York University. She grew up in the City of Scarborough in Toronto, Ontario and for over 20 years has been in a relationship with a man who has a history of imprisonment. She uses her experiences of supporting her incarcerated loved one to guide her academic research. Her unique social location as an insider/outsider to both street culture and academia gives her work a raw and unique perspective into the collateral consequences of imprisonment and the Canadian “justice” system. Melissa recently completed a Mitacs funded qualitative research study exploring the experiences of women supporting an imprisoned loved one in Ontario during the COVID-19 pandemic.