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Keynote Address: Empirically Exploring Narrative Productions of Meaning in Public Life

Abstract Because socially circulating stories are key vehicles producing shared meaning in globalized, mass-mediated, and heterogeneous social orders, it is important to understand how some stories – and only some stories – can be evaluated by large numbers of people as believable and important. How do stories achieve widespread cognitive and emotional persuasiveness? I argue that understanding narrative persuasiveness requires a cultural-level analysis examining relationships between story characteristics and two kinds of meaning: *Symbolic codes* which are systems of cognitive meaning and *emotion codes* which are systems of emotional meaning. Persuasiveness of narratives is achieved by using the most widely and deeply held meanings of these codes to build narrative scenes, characters, plots, and morals. I demonstrate my argument using the example of the codes embedded in the social problem story of “family violence,” and I conclude with some thoughts about how sociologists might approach the production of socially circulating stories as topics of qualitative research and why there are practical and theoretical reasons to do so. My central argument is that examining relationships between cultural systems of meaning and the characteristics of narratives is a route to understanding a key method of public persuasion in heterogeneous, mass-mediated social orders.

Keywords Narrative; Symbolic Code; Public Communication; Emotion; Persuasion

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December, 2012: A 20-year-old walks into an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, U.S.A. and guns down 20 six- and seven-year-old children and six teachers. There is a united definition of the event throughout the Western world: This is unthinkable, it is grotesque, it is a “massacre of the innocent.” Many Americans and Canadians having no personal ties to the people of Newtown nonetheless travel great distances to attend the funerals of the young children, the *Wall Street Journal* reports that this event was so emotionally devastating that it decreased Christmas shopping throughout the United States.

Consider this event as evidence of a puzzle: From time to time enormous numbers of people sharing little in the way of practical experiences or world

views unite in cognitive and emotional evaluations of events that lie outside their own lives. Such events are not personally experienced and they involve strangers, so meanings must be based on some form of public communication. How can public communication encourage particular ways of *thinking* and *feeling* among mass audiences?

My focus is on the persuasive work of socially circulating narratives. These narratives – stories – about particular people or about types of people are used by politicians to sell themselves and their policies, by advertisers to sell products, by preachers and teachers to demonstrate moral principles, by social activists to inspire moral outrage, by textbook writers and journalists to generate attention. My interest is in understanding how such stories work and the work these stories do in encouraging shared meaning in globalized, cyber-mediated worlds characterized by extraordinary social, political, and economic heterogeneity and moral fragmentation.¹

The topic of relationships between socially circulating stories and shared meaning has two central dimensions: There are questions about how stories create meanings, and there are questions about how practical actors use their understandings of these meanings as sensemaking tools in their own lives. While questions about meaning constructions and consumptions are inextricably related; here, I will primarily focus on the *production* of stories and bracket questions about their consumption. My basic questions are practical and straightforward: While many stories are told, only some circulate widely, and very few achieve

¹ I benefited enormously from the comments and suggestions of Antony Puddephatt on an earlier draft of this paper.

widespread evaluations that they are believable and important. How is it that some stories – and only some stories – are cognitively and emotionally persuasive to more than a few people?

I will begin with briefly summarizing the consequences of socially circulating stories. This justifies my claim that such stories do important work in both private and public life so researchers should examine questions about their production. I will continue by exploring how systems of ideas, called symbolic codes and emotion codes, furnish the building blocks to construct narrative scenes, plots, characters, and morals. Then, using the exemplary social problems story of “family violence,” I will demonstrate my claims that cognitive and emotional persuasiveness are encouraged when the story contents reflect how audience members make sense of the world around them. My central argument is that the more story elements reflect widely and deeply held systems of cognitive and emotional meanings, the more stories have potential to be widely evaluated as believable and important and, therefore, to go on to do important work in private and public life. I continue by outlining some possible questions for sociological, qualitative researchers about the productions of meaning in socially circulating stories, and I end with reflecting upon some practical and theoretical reasons why such studies are needed.

The Importance of Socially Circulating Stories in Private and Public Lives

Public life is awash with stories. There are those of particular people, the individual heroes and villains and victims, and there are those types

of people, such as “the alcoholic,” “the terrorist,” “the soldier.” Stories circulating in the media, in courts, speeches, textbooks, sermons, and advertisements do a great deal of work in both private and public life.

Socially circulating stories are important in private life. For example, individuals in modern environments must craft their own stories to create a sense of a coherent self (Gergen 1994; McAdams 1996), and, to be evaluated as believable, these stories must “at least partially reflect the kinds of stories that prevail in...culture” (McAdams 1996:301). Further, it is not uncommon for people experiencing troubles, such as illness or divorce, to scan the social environment for stories to help them make sense of their experiences, to offer images of who they are, of who they might become (Plummer 1995). Still further, there is evidence that socially circulating stories function in the background of thinking in daily life. For example, women who are raped sometimes categorize their own experiences based on their understandings of the archetypal story of “rape” (Wood and Rennie 1994), battered women sometimes refuse to define their own experiences as those of “wife abuse” because they believe their own experiences do not match that socially circulating story (Baker 1996). Still further, women relying on welfare (Secombe, James, and Battle Walters 1998) and mothers who are teens (Kirkman et al. 2001) believe others respond to them not as unique individuals but as instances of the narrative characters found in socially circulating stories about “welfare queens” and “teen mothers.” While here I am bracketing questions about how social actors understand the meanings of particular stories, it is clear that socially circulating stories have mul-

tiples consequences for practical actors in their private lives.

Socially circulating stories also do considerable work in public life. It is stories, not statistics, that sustain war as culturally and morally acceptable (Smith 2005), and stories define the meaning of “national identity” (Shenhav 2009). Stories told in public policy hearings define moral landscapes of problems (Whittle and Mueller 2012), and these stories justify social policy (Schneider and Ingram 1993) and the institutional arrangements that result (Alexander 1992). Because stories mobilize social activists (Polletta 1997), and activists use stories to persuade the public to support social causes (Loseke 2003), narratives have been called a foundational characteristic of movements for social change (Davis 2002). Socially circulating stories of types of people with different types of problems also serve as templates for social service workers to make sense of the unique people using service agencies (Santiago-Irizarry 2001; Rains, Davies, and McKinnon 2004), pattern the work of courts of law (Amsterdam and Bruner 2000), and shape political campaigns and presidential communications (Smith 2005). Critically, while the narrative form is apolitical in its structure, stories can be very political in their consequences: Stories can be used to support *or* challenge the *status quo*, to support *or* challenge calls for social change, to support *or* challenge political agendas, laws, organizational procedures, and so on (Ewick and Silbey 1995).

Academics claim that the narrative form is pervasive throughout social life because it is persuasive, and this form is persuasive because it has potential to appeal to both thinking and to feeling. *How*

can stories in public spaces achieve cognitive and/or emotional persuasiveness? This is an especially important question within modern environments where social, political, and economic heterogeneity and moral fragmentation discourage widespread agreement about the cognitive or emotional meanings of particular events and people. Yet, we know that social life – especially within democracies – depends upon shared meaning. If stories encourage shared meaning, it is important to understand how they do so.

The Cultural Contexts of Narrative Production: Symbolic Codes and Emotion Codes

Much is known about the characteristics of stories that tend to be evaluated by relatively large audiences as believable and important (see Loseke 2007 for a review). For example, in the not-so-distant past, before the so-called “new media,” the most common way for a story to become widely known was for it to circulate through mass media (television, radio, newspapers, magazines) and this required conforming to a certain *media logic*, which privileges stories characterized by drama and flash (Altheide 2002). In addition, observers traditionally have argued that *storytellers* matter: Stories told by experts or other advantaged people tend to be evaluated as more believable and more important than stories told by people who are socially, politically, economically, or sexually marginalized (Loseke 2003).

Behind these often mentioned factors influencing audience evaluations of narrative believability and importance lies something much less discussed: Story flash and story tellers do not mat-

ter if the story does not make sense given what audience members “think they know, what they value, and what they regard as appropriate and promising” (Davis 2002:17-18). This leads to questions about relationships between *culture* and the productions and contents of narrative meanings.

“Culture” comprises a range of ideas and objects, including norms, myths, traditions, rituals, material artifacts, and so on. Socially circulating systems of meaning that are used by story authors to compose story scenes, characters, plots, and morals are of particular interest in understanding the persuasive possibilities of stories. Symbolic codes are systems of meaning surrounding cultural ways of *thinking*; emotion codes are about cultural ways of *feeling*. The more widely shared, the more these systems of meaning can be understood as an important aspect of the “collective consciousness” (Durkheim 1961), or as an “impersonal archipelagos of meaning...shared in common” (Zerubavel 1996:428).

Symbolic codes

I will follow Jeffrey Alexander (1992) and call the first type of meaning system “symbolic codes,” although this concept has much in common with similar ideas such as discursive formations (Foucault 1980), semiotic codes (Swidler 1995), interpretive codes (Cerulo 2000), cultural coherence systems (Linde 1993), cultural themes (Gamson 1988), and symbolic repertoires (Williams 2002). While larger theoretical frameworks lead to different kinds of questions and assumptions about these systems of meaning, all share a basic conceptualization of these codes as densely packed, complex, and interlocking visions of how the world

works, how the world should work, and of rights and responsibilities of people in this world. Observers have de-constructed the contents of many symbolic codes, among the most central are the “Standard North American Family” (Smith 1999), mothering (Gazso 2012), family values (Williams 2002), individualism (Bellah et al. 1985), American values (Hutcheson et al. 2004), the American way of life (Johnson 2002), citizens and enemies (Alexander 1992), victims (Holstein and Miller 1990; Best 1997; Lamb 1999), violence (Cerulo 1998), the deserving poor (Loseke and Fawcett 1995), good health (Edgley and Brissett 1990), the Stockholm Syndrome (Adorjan et al. 2012), and emotion (Lutz 1986).

Considerable research has shown how symbolic codes are consequential. For example, the codes of “welfare recipient” (Gring-Pemble 2001) and “deserving poor” (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010) shape public policy toward poor people in the United States, and the justification of the civil rights clause in the Violence against Women’s Act drew on the “victimhood” code (Picart 2003). In addition, the code of “romance” discourages young women from using condoms to prevent disease (Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Smith 1998), and media in the United States constructed the meanings of the events of September 11, 2001 in terms of the codes of “victims,” “villains,” and “heroes” (Anker 2005).

Symbolic codes are systems of thinking. As such they can be useful in constructing narrative scenes, plots, characters, and morals that persuade through appeals to logic. While important, observers note that characteristics of the modern social order, such as loss of faith in institutions, rapid change, moral

fragmentation, and resulting personal insecurities, have led to more emphasis on emotional consciousness where what we feel can be judged as more important than what we think (McCarthy 1989). Not surprisingly, observers note increasing appeals to emotion in public communication (Waddell 1990; Altheide 2002; Richards 2004). This brings me to a second type of cultural meaning system, “emotion codes.”

Emotion Codes

What I am calling emotion codes goes by other names such as emotion schemas (White 1990), emotional cultures (Gordon 1990; Stearns 2010), emotionologies (Stearns and Stearns 1985), and feeling rules, framing rules, and expression rules (Hochschild 1979). These codes are complexes of expectations, standards, and ideals surrounding emotion; they are cognitive models about which emotions are expected when, where, and toward whom or what, as well as about how emotions should be inwardly experienced, outwardly expressed, and morally evaluated. These systems of meaning are the “structuring and constituting resources which we utilize in expressing our own emotional states and in responding to those of others” (Tudor 2003:241). Although there has been far more interest in examining the contents of symbolic codes, some emotion codes have been deconstructed. Among them are codes surrounding jealousy (Stearns 1989), sympathy (Clark 1997), love (Swidler 2001), fear (Altheide 2002), and closure to grief (Berns 2011).

There are many empirical examples demonstrating the importance of emotion codes in public communication. For example, from the beginning

of the United States to the present, American presidents have used “war rhetoric,” a particular type of communication whose goal is persuading citizens that war is necessary. Historians and others have found that, throughout all eras, such communication blends appeals to logic justifying the practicality and expediency of war with appeals to emotions such as national pride (Murphy 2003), the joys of victory (Moerk and Pincus 2000), anger toward and/or fear of the enemy (Burkitt 2005), and sympathy for American casualties (Coles 2002). Others have argued that the narrative ability to appeal to emotion is critical in social problems advocacy (see Loseke 2003 for a review) and in encouraging support for public policy (Waddell 1990). For example, the 1996 welfare reform hearings in the United States can be understood as reflecting the “politics of disgust” toward women welfare recipients (Hancock 2004).

General Characteristics of Symbolic and Emotion Codes

As analytic concepts, symbolic codes and emotion codes have several characteristics that define their usefulness, as well as their limitations. First, although symbolic codes and emotion codes are analytically distinct, they are *inextricably intertwined* in practice. Although Western scholars traditionally argued for a body-mind dualism, relegating emotion to the body and cognition to the mind, observers now argue that it is not possible to separate thinking from feeling in embodied experience (see Loseke and Kusenbach 2008 for a review). Furthermore, thinking and feeling cannot be separated in their discursive formations because symbolic codes – systems of thinking – invariably are accompanied by emotion codes –

systems of feeling. Particular cognitive images of people (such as victims, mothers), events (such as war, floods), places (such as home, country) are associated with expectable emotional reactions toward such people, events, and places. We feel about family every bit as much as we think about family, we feel about war every bit as much as we think about war, and so on (see Irvine 1997 for an example of how “co-dependency” is both a symbolic code and an emotion code).

Second, there are multiple variations in *code contents*. There are predictable *national* variations (see Safdar et al. 2009 for an example) and contents tend to vary over *time*. For an example, the symbolic code of “mothering” has changed in the recent past with consequences for social policy (Gazso 2012), and there have been important historical changes in the code of jealousy (Stearns 1989). Third, there are differences in the social *strength* and *importance* of codes. Some codes are known by relatively small numbers of people (tipping etiquette in New York City apartment buildings), while others are known to much larger audiences (individualism, patriotism). Some codes are centrally important (the innocence of young children, freedom), while others are superficial (Christmas gift giving, weddings). Finally, there are major variations in how the contents, meanings, and importance of codes are *understood* by individuals. In addition to unpredictable individual differences, there are predictable variations in how people understand codes associated with *places* (national, regional, and urban/rural differences), as well as with *social* and *demographic* characteristics: Consequences of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and religiosity can encourage people to see the world in very different ways (see Karasz

2005 for an example of variability in understandings of “depression” and how these influence help-seeking). In brief, when I claim that codes can be “shared,” this is a shorthand of saying “more or less shared by a greater or lesser” number of people.

Emphasizing variability is important in order to avoid conceptualizing practical actors as “cultural robots” who somehow “apply” codes to whatever needs evaluating. That image cannot be correct because an important characteristic of our modern world is the presence of many, often contradictory, meanings. Stories that present gay marriage as a simple civil right circulate alongside stories of gay marriage as a sin; stories containing a “poor person” character who seems a victim of an unjust economic system circulate with other stories containing a “poor person” character who seems lazy and morally suspect.

Because symbolic codes and emotion codes are macro-level concepts, they neither explain nor predict how *particular* people cognitively and emotionally evaluate socially circulating stories. Yet, these codes nonetheless are important because they are aspects of a “cultural toolkit” (Swidler 1986), a “scheme of interpretation” (Schütz 1970), “interpretive structure” (Miller and Holstein 1989), or a “membership categorization device” (Sacks 1972). The more widely circulating, the more codes are available for social actors to use – or decide to reject or to modify – to serve practical purposes. As an obvious example, we have multiple examples of how codes, what Hochschild (1979) calls feeling rules, framing rules, and expression rules (what I call emotion codes), actually shape individual experiences and understand-

ings (see Abiala 1999; McCoyd 2009; Keys 2010 for examples).

Thus, while the concepts of symbolic code and emotion code cannot predict individual subjectivity, they are a part of the cultural context that provides the material from which actors shape their own understandings of the meanings of objects, experiences, events, and people. The more widely shared and the more deeply held these codes are, the more available and potentially important they can be in shaping evaluations of meaning and experience. This leads to a prediction that the persuasiveness of socially circulating stories will be encouraged when story elements – scenes, plots, characters, and morals – more-or-less reflect audience members’ understandings of the symbolic codes and emotion codes that shape story contents. I will demonstrate this with a story of my experience teaching a course about “family violence.”

The Scenes, Characters, Plots, and Morals of the Story of “Family Violence”

For many years I have taught an undergraduate course called “family violence.” What I have found is that students are not very interested in many violent behaviors – they do not care if adult couples slap, push, or shove one another, nor do they care if parents spank their children or if siblings fight or throw toys at one another. Critically, what is not interesting is, simultaneously, not morally troubling. What *is* interesting, what *is* morally troubling is extreme violence experienced by the most morally exemplary victims, especially when this violence is done by morally reprehensible offenders. This evaluation tendency is not just about my students: As reflected in

opinion polls, the understandings and decisions of police, judges, juries, child protective service workers, and shelter workers, only some stories cognitively and emotionally persuade audience members to evaluate violence as morally intolerable and therefore, as something that must be condemned and eliminated.

Understanding how stories of family violence do – or do not achieve – cognitive or emotional persuasiveness requires examining four principal symbolic codes that shape story contents: violence, family, victims, and villains, which, in turn, are associated with a variety of emotion codes including anger, hate, and disgust toward villains and violence, compassion and sympathy toward victims.

First, stories of family violence feature particular plots that revolve around *violence*. While dictionaries define “violence” as a synonym of “force,” these behavioral descriptions are morally neutral while courses in family violence – as well as public concern with violence – is about violence evaluated as *abuse*, a term that is a moral evaluation rather than a behavioral description. Not all violence or force is typically evaluated as abusive. Indeed, Karen Cerulo (1998) found that very few Americans are true pacifists who condemn all violence. Most people tend to approve of – or at least are willing to tolerate – some kinds of violence with some kinds of consequences on some kinds of occasions by some kinds of people. A specific instance of violence tends to be labeled as abusive when – and only when – it is evaluated as intentionally done *and* as done for no “good reason” *and* as involving behaviors that sound severe *and* as creating serious injuries (Cerulo 1998). Hence,

my students’ lack of concern with violence that does not seem too severe (such as slaps, pushes, or shoves), or with violence that might be evaluated as done for a good reason (such as self-defense), as not intentional (accidental), or as yielding no injury is predictable: Their lack of concern reflects the cultural code surrounding the meanings and evaluations of *all* violence.

On a case-by-case basis, individuals evaluate the moral meanings of particular instances of violence and they do this by drawing from common-sense assumptions about what is and what is not intentional, justified, and excessive, and about what does and what does not constitute serious injury. Therefore, it is to be expected that there can be major differences in individual evaluations of the moral status of any particular instance of violence. What is a “good reason” to one person might not be a “good reason” to another, what is “serious injury” to one person might not be a “serious injury” to another, and so on. As a consequence, stories that are successful in encouraging a widespread evaluation of violence as morally intolerable abuse rather than morally tolerable violence tend to *emphasize* its intentionality, unreasonableness, excessiveness, and harmful consequences (Loseke 2003).

Second, stories of family violence take place within a particular scene – the family. At first glance, the juxtaposition of the codes “family” and “violence” seem contradictory within industrialized Western countries where family and childbearing are increasingly less understood as mandatory obligations and are more embraced as voluntary relationships valued for their emotional support (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001). Although

the symbolic code of family is incompatible with the morally pejorative behaviors of *abuse*, expectations about family relationships allow for, and might even predict, the presence of the non-pejorative behaviors of *violence*.

For example, while not as pronounced as in earlier eras, many Americans continue to believe that parents have the right – indeed, the obligation – to “socialize” their children and that this might require “punishment.” Within this symbolic code of parenting behaviors known as “spanking” become morally tolerable because they are done for a “good reason.” Stories encouraging evaluating violence as abusive must circumvent the tendency to evaluate parents’ violence toward children as morally neutral “punishment,” and a common way to do this is to construct plots containing the most *extreme* violence yielding the most *extreme* consequences. Stories of such extreme behaviors and extreme consequences – particularly when victims are infants – lead my students to the strong emotions of moral outrage.

Our images of family as people whose lives are physically and emotionally intertwined can also lead to expectations that family relationships should include deep emotional attachments, expectations, and experiences that, from time to time, might be experienced as emotionally overwhelming. In popular understandings – and in practical experience – the emotions of family can overpower logic. This assumption is so common that there is a term for violence evaluated as resulting from unplanned, unintended, and uncontrollable emotional overload: “expressive violence.” This type of violence is often evaluated as unfortunate, yet understandable, and therefore

– forgivable. The kind of violence that is *not* tolerated is “instrumental violence” which is violence judged as intended and done in order to achieve a goal (Cerulo 1998). Given these ideas, it is understandable that stories encouraging audience members to evaluate violence as abusive often tend to emphasize that, while victimizers often *claim* they “lost control,” in reality they use violence in order to terrorize their victims into submission.

Third, for a story of violence to be evaluated as important and persuasive it must contain a *victim* story character. The code of victim has been much examined (Holstein and Miller 1990; Best 1997; Lamb 1999), and observers agree that being evaluated as experiencing harm is necessary, but *not* sufficient, to be accorded the status of victim. Victim is a designation for a person evaluated as a (1) good person (2) who has been greatly harmed (3) for no good reason and (4) from no fault of their own. Again, because individuals have very different standards for judging moral worth, extent of harm and responsibility, and the adequacy of reason, stories that achieve widespread persuasiveness will tend to *dramatize* victim morality, lack of responsibility, extent of harm, and lack of reason for the harm. The most persuasive stories of child abuse tend to feature babies and toddlers rather than teens, and stories of wife abuse tend to feature women who are portrayed as saintly in their characteristics, motivations, and behaviors. It is abusive violence *on these types of characters* that leads to moral outrage.

The symbolic code of victim is inextricably linked to the emotion code of sympathy. According to Candace Clark (1997), sympathy is the expected emotional response toward people evaluated as

good people who are greatly harmed through no fault and for no good reason. Therefore, to evaluate a person as a victim is, simultaneously, to evaluate the person as worthy of sympathy. Furthermore, Clark maintains that the code of sympathy includes the expectation that sympathy should be accompanied by the behavior of “help”: Good people who are greatly harmed through no fault of their own should be helped. Therefore, social services help women leave their abusive partners, they help abusive children by taking them away from abusive parents, and so on. This is a very practical reason why stories containing persuasive victims are especially important: Linking victim to sympathy and sympathy to help is the justification for social intervention.

Fourth and finally, persuasive stories of family violence must have a *villain*, a type of character evaluated as an (1) immoral person who (2) intentionally (3) does great harm and (4) who does this harm for no good reason. The cultural code of villain is associated with particular emotional reactions and behaviors: A villain can be hated or despised, and, within the logic of emotion codes, if villains are condemnation worthy then they also deserve the behavior of punishment. Not surprisingly, just as persuasive stories of the social problem of family violence contain the purest of victims, they contain villains who are most clearly evil. One of the intriguing characteristics of common stories of family violence is that the villainy of villains often is dramatized by describing it as hidden; to outsiders, family violence villains often seem to be morally exemplary people. Their atrocious behavior toward their family members is unexpected. This common twist in villain characters makes these stories particularly interesting.

All of this is quite complicated. On a case-by-case basis in daily life we accomplish categorizations of violence, victims, and villains – *and all else*. In so doing, we simultaneously evoke systems of ideas about expectable emotional responses. Symbolic and emotion codes link victim characters with sympathy, and sympathy with help; they link villain characters with condemnation, and condemnation with punishment. Likewise, evaluating violence as abuse simultaneously leads to a range of emotions, from disdain to anger to disgust, and so on.

In summary, my claim is that symbolic codes and emotion codes are the building blocks to construct story scenes, plots, characters, and morals. The more stories incorporate the most widely held and centrally important codes, the more they have the potential to be cognitively and emotionally persuasive to large audiences. Conversely, the more stories contain contentious, debated codes, the more likely they will not receive widespread support. Under these generalities lie countless empirical questions, to which I now turn.

Empirically Examining Productions of Narrative Meanings in Public Life

Because publicly circulating stories are an important source of meaning creation, they are worthy of empirical examination. I will start with some observations about stories as a topic of research, and conclude with some types of questions that might be asked.

Narratives as Topics for Qualitative Research

People interested in stories as topics of research agree that such studies require *qualitative data* and

analytic techniques (Stalker 2009). However, my interest in developing methodologies for such examinations is *not* a project supported by all members of the community of narrative scholars: Some people believe that analysis must be so inductive and allow for so much variation and creativity that efforts to specify, much less codify, methods are counter-productive (Josselson 2003). My own beliefs are with others who argue that the potential for narrative research to yield useful insights about social life will not be realized without analyses that are more systematic than what now is common (Atkinson and Delamont 2006). Stated bluntly, while a hallmark of qualitative, interpretive research is its insistence on the importance of context, this leads to an inability to generalize and hence, to continued accumulation of case studies that are not easily combined. While remaining true to our understanding of the importance of context, we nonetheless need to move away from the “relativism, subjectivism, and fetishization of the uniqueness of each setting” (Smith 2005:35).

Within this contested terrain, methodologies for examining *personal* narratives, the stories people tell about themselves, have been the topic of considerable attention (see Riessman 2008; Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Holstein and Gubrium 2012). Yet, there has been little interest in developing methods for examining questions about socially circulating stories. As a consequence, published works on these topics tend to include only the thinnest of descriptions of the data, as well as little or no attention to the techniques used to analyze data. My project is to develop qualitative methodologies that, while recognizing the value of creativity, nonetheless, promote the value of systematic explorations (Loseke 2012). Here, I will

only briefly explore some of the potential types of questions that might be asked about the production of socially circulating stories.

Questions about Story Production

The first questions in examining *any* particular socially circulating story must be about context: Who authored the story? Why was the story authored? Where is the story located? Who is the intended audience? What consequences would be expected from these story characteristics? Within our mass mediated world these can be difficult questions because the sources – authors – of stories can be hidden, stories often have multiple authors, these authors often tell stories that seem only slightly different, but which lead to major differences in their morals, stories can be repeatedly transmitted from one site to another, they can be mis-attributed, maliciously or unintentionally modified, taken out of the original context of their telling, and so on. While locating answers to questions about the contexts of story production can require considerable detective work, establishing story background is critical because without context it is not possible to say anything about the possible or probable processes behind the creation of stories.

Once context is established questions about story contents can be asked: What is the scene? Who are the primary characters and what types of people are they? Are there victims, villains, and/or heroes? Are story characters particular people or are they types of people? Where is agency and what can it do? What is the story plot? What is central to the plot and what is mere detail? What are the morals of the story? What kind of a world

does this story promote? A careful examination of the contents of stories – scenes, plots, characters, morals – often can show the subtle meanings and moral evaluations that are being carried by the story. In other words, this kind of analysis cannot be done by “coding” words or phrases in the story; it is not about what is obvious in the story. At times, whole systems of moral values and moral evaluations lurk under explicit story contents, at times, it is more important to examine what is *not* in the story than what *is* in it (see Loseke 2012 for an example of how a story of the “teen mother” contains such subtle lessons).

Questions about Story Persuasiveness

Here, I have focused on the importance of understanding persuasiveness for the obvious reason that persuasive stories can go on to do a great deal of work in private and public life. Because symbolic codes and emotion codes are the social structures of meaning that allow stories to be evaluated as believable and important by more than a few people, unpacking the contents of codes contained in stories is an especially important task. Yet, most certainly, this is very difficult work. There are obvious problems when analysts and story authors do *not* share meaning systems, particularly when meaning systems structuring particular stories are antagonistic to those of the analyst. The more systems of meanings contained in stories challenge those held by analysts, the more difficult it is to grasp the internal logics of these systems. Any project of de-constructing systems of ideas requires sustained attention to these predictable problems when analysts do not share a belief in the meaning systems encoded in the stories being examined.

Just as problematic is when analysts *do* share codes of the story’s author, there is a tendency to not recognize systems of meaning as systems of meaning but rather to gloss over them as if they were simple “factual” statements about the world. Codes such as race/ethnicity and gender are particularly prone to be unanalyzed. Codes that are not recognized as codes are particularly powerful precisely because they are invisible and do their work outside of conscious awareness (Hall 1999).

Consider, for example, the American obsession with “good health.” When de-constructed (Edgley and Brissett 1990), what sounds so positive – good health – is a system of ideas that has multiple negative consequences. This includes assuming that “health” is under individual control, which implies that people are responsible for any “bad health” they suffer. “Good health” also leads to expectations about lifestyles – such as the necessity to eat high quality food and to engage in formal exercise programs – that can be met only by people with considerable money and leisure time. Further, “good health” is both a symbolic code and an emotion code because good health is taken as a sign of moral goodness which should be praised, while bad health is taken as a sign of moral weakness that should be condemned. My point here is because the goodness of “health” seems obvious, analysts might well not even see this as a code, as a system of ideas containing multiple layers meaning, not all of which have uniformly positive consequences.

While I have been focusing on how *analysts* can examine systems of meaning embedded in socially circulating stories, it is critical to distinguish between analysts’ understandings and those of

audiences. We know a great deal about narrative consumption – how stories are used by social actors to justify policy, sell politicians and products, mobilize publics, and so on. We need more attention to how audience members *understand* narrative meaning. All too often sociological analysts focus on understanding what is most common and therefore, questions about “outliers,” the less common, are not in sharp focus.

Consider, for example, the story of “September 11, 2001” told by American President George W. Bush. Public opinion polls show that Bush’s speeches about the events of September 11 were remarkably effective in both calming the great majority of Americans, as well as in encouraging them to support what was to become known as the “war on terror” (see Loseke 2009 for a review of this literature). However, not all Americans were persuaded by this melodramatic story featuring morally pure Americans as victims who now had the opportunity to become heroes and save the civilized world from the evil terrorists. Cheryl Mattingly and her colleagues (Mattingly, Lawlor, and Jaccobs-Huey 2002) talked with poor minority mothers and found that the poverty and racism patterning these women’s lives led them to reject the truthfulness of the “America as victim” story. The daily harshness and deprivation these women faced because of their race and poverty led them to find it amusing that the events of September 11 had led privileged, pampered middle-class Americans to experience “psychological trauma.” In brief, the general persuasiveness of Bush’s speeches was accomplished by constructing a story reflecting the underlying assumptions of the politically central portion of the total population in the United States. Yet, these are not nec-

essarily understandings shared by disadvantaged segments of the population.

While qualitative researchers often have the skills to recognize subtle meanings contained in socially circulating stories, it is nonetheless critical to explore and understand narrative meaning as perceived by *audience members*. Who is persuaded by particular stories? Who is not persuaded? What are the social and political implications of patterns of persuasion? Important projects about the production of meaning should be in the form of audience reception studies: How do different groups of people make sense of socially circulating stories? How does story persuasiveness vary by race/ethnicity, social class, immigration status, political identification, and so on? How do important stories – those justifying policy, social arrangements, and so on – reflect or ignore the understandings and needs of various sub-populations? How are the meanings of these important stories understood by particular groups of immigrants? Given the social and political work that stories do it is critical to understand *whose* meanings are embedded in stories and how stories are understood by those whose meaning is *not* reflected in them.

Finally, stories are built from symbolic and emotion codes, and these codes are culturally situated. Given the rapid, worldwide circulation of stories, it should be expected that stories of all kinds will be associated with mis-communications and misunderstandings. While cross-cultural communication *always* involves such potentials, stories are especially prone to be misunderstood because so much of what is conveyed in them is in subtle images rather than in explicit statements. Consider

how my examples here have been focused on stories and codes circulating in the United States. Portions of my rendition of the social problems story of family violence might make little or no sense to those embracing different understandings of the symbolic codes of violence, victim, villain, and family. How much of what I claimed is particularly American and therefore, limited to one country? This is a demonstration of what has been called the primary need for direct cross-cultural and historical comparisons (Stearns 2010). The problem of cross-cultural communication, that traditionally was a concern primarily for academics, tourists, and foreign diplomats, has been transformed into a global problem created by global communication, global economics, and global politics. Understanding the internal logic of meaning systems is a necessary step in achieving cross-cultural understandings.

Conclusions

I have focused on one question in this manuscript: How is it possible for socially circulating stories to achieve cognitive and emotional persuasiveness in large, heterogeneous, and morally fragmented audiences? I argued that persuasiveness can be encouraged when story scenes, plots, characters, and morals reflect the world views and moral reasoning of audience members who evaluate story believability and importance. The more stories are built from the systems of meaning contained in the most widely circulating and the most deeply held symbolic codes and emotion codes, the more persuasive the story potential is. Conversely, the more stories are built upon contested codes, the smaller the approving audience for that story likely will be.

While my question about apparent persuasive abilities of socially circulating stories is only one of several questions about the interrelated processes of the productions and consumptions of narrative meaning, this is an important question for practical and theoretical reasons.

Understanding the organization and work of vehicles of public persuasion is of *practical* importance in our world increasingly characterized as globalized and cyber-mediated, where vast differences in experiences and life chances yield extreme heterogeneity and moral fragmentation, even when people are sharing space and engaging in joint activities. Under these conditions, *meaning* becomes a problem: The meaning of events, objects, or people is not given; meaning can rapidly change. When meaning is a problem, shared meaning is particularly difficult: The meanings of any particular object, event, or person are often multiple and highly contested. What is the meaning of abortion? What is the meaning of Islamic head scarves? What is the meaning of immigration? The problems with meaning become particularly important in democracies which require debate and compromise. Consider the current political condition in the United States where divisions between Democrats and Republicans are so great that the federal government has been all but paralyzed for over the last two years. While this is a continuing source of material for comedians, it is serious: The work of governing is not being done. Consider also the social problems throughout Europe that are being created by vast immigrations of people who do not necessarily share a Western, Christian/Jewish vision of the world, and who do not perceive they are being treated fairly, and so on. These are the problems of meaning in our modern world.

Although questions about meaning are important for very practical reasons, these questions are also theoretically important. Indeed, sociologists argue that questions about the cultural productions and consumptions of meaning must be central in explorations about the organization and structures of the social world (Lamont 2000). Concerns about the process of meaning making and the contents of this meaning are visible in several lines of research.

For example, observers interested in the workings of culture have been examining how social actors go about categorizing people, objects, and events and how these conceptual distinctions can become objectified as forms of unequal access to and unequal distribution of social resources (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Observers of public policy argue that understanding the process and contents of social policy require examining how policies

are also stories embedded in particular sets of social meaning (Stone 1997; Fisher 2003). Likewise, observers note that politicians must justify war by constructing a “cultural mandate” (Smith 2005), that we cannot understand political speech without knowing the underlying structures of meaning from which this speech draws (Alexander 2010), and that if we want to understand political divisions, we must explore relationships between political platforms and underlying visions of morality upon which these platforms are built (Lakoff 1996).

These examples are merely instances of the general point: We cannot take meaning in our modern world for granted. We know that a common vehicle for meaning making is socially circulating stories and we know a great deal about the work these stories do in public and private lives. Now, we need to pay more attention to how these stories work.

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