1 CONCEPTUALIZING NARRATIVE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

There are multiple understandings of what narratives are and what they do, which is not surprising given the prevalence of interest in narrative across a variety of professions and academic disciplines. While this diversity is beneficial because it offers multiple lens from which to understand the work of stories in social life, it simultaneously can create confusions when similar terms have multiple meanings, when similar meanings go by different names. Hence, I will start by developing a theoretical scaffolding to draw upon in subsequent chapters focusing on narrative as a topic and method of empirical research.[1] This conceptual framework includes narrative characteristics (narrative content, narrative types), narrative authors and audiences, narrative as a sensemaking communication form, and narrative evaluation. It also includes two broad topics surrounding narrative contexts: relationships between narratives and culture which places stories within their social contexts, and relationships between narratives and power which places stories within their political contexts. What unites this diverse list of topics is, in isolation and in combination, each leads to specific empirical questions (Chapter 2), best examined through particular kinds of data and analytic techniques (Part II).

NARRATIVE CHARACTERISTICS

Stories vary remarkably. They can be as short as a sentence or as long as a multiyear television program; they can be told as fact or as fiction, in poetry or in prose; they can be written, spoken, sung, drawn, acted, or danced; they can encourage audiences to think and/or to feel in particular ways.

Narrative Content

Despite remarkable variation, stories are a recognizable form of communication: somewhere (scene) something happens (events) to someone/something (characters).

Story events unfold within *scenes*, the most important of which for social research are physical (such as urban/rural location) and social (such as

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ideological, historical, cultural, economic). Many common research questions are explicitly about story scenes. Questions about the experiences of immigration, for example, are about consequences of moving from one physical/social scene to another; questions about globalization, urbanization, gentrification, and so on are about the social consequences of changing scenes, and so on. Yet even when not a specific research question, scenes *always* are important because they are a critical *context* for story content, story making, storytelling, and story evaluating. Particular kinds of stories can be told—or cannot be told—in particular times and particular places to particular audiences by particular people for particular purposes. Stories will receive different kinds of audience evaluations depending upon where, when, why, by whom, and to whom they are told.

Second, stories contain *events* which have four characteristics: (1) With the exception of mysteries which contain unrelated events included in order to confuse, most stories contain primarily those events needed to create the story; (2) story events are coordinated by a plot which links events into a coherent whole; (3) regardless of the order in which events are told, events in a completed story are time-ordered which conveys images of causality; (4) events achieve their meaning through *contextualization* within the story. The event of a "woman putting on makeup," for example, has very different meanings depending upon whether the woman is covering bruises from a beating, a sex worker preparing for work, or a happy bride dressing for her wedding.

Third, stories of particular interest to social researchers most often contain *characters*, and these characters are human rather than animal or mythical. There are two broad types of narrative characters. Some stories, especially those told in daily life, contain characters who are unique and embodied, such as stories about "my cousin, Mary" or "the man sitting next to me on the train this morning." Many other stories, especially those told on public stages, contain characters who are disembodied *categories* of people such as "African American," "elderly," "college student," and so on. Additionally, it is common for story characters of both types to be recognizable character *types* such as the "good American," the "fool," the "do-gooder," or the "drama queen." The character types of "victim," "villain," and "hero" are staples in stories associated with social problems, politics, and social protest.[2]

Individual stories vary greatly in the extent to which they are centered on scene, events, or characters, and any story can be told in multiple ways. A story about a "murder," for example, can focus on characteristics of the physical/social/cultural environment surrounding the murder (scene focused); on "what happened" (event focused); or on particular people such as victims,

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villains, or witnesses (character focused). Story authors decide how to contextualize story events and characters, what to emphasize, what to merely include, and what to exclude. Decisions about contextualization, inclusions, and exclusions are neither random nor inconsequential.

Narrative Types

It sometimes is useful to think of stories in terms of *genre*, a term for stories sharing particular content. Such stories also can be called *formula stories* because they feature predictable plots and characters. While some social observers examine stories in terms of traditional fictional genre classifications such as comedy, tragedy, and drama, other genre classifications pertain particularly to stories circulating in social life including the genres of *social problems* (a plot of devastating harm experienced by characters who are moral people not responsible for the harm they experience), *American Dream* (characters who are moral people working diligently with an expected story outcome of financial and social success), or *coming out* (the experiences of LGBTQ characters who inform family/friends of their sexuality).[3]

Story genre also can focus on story authors. Such genres include *self-stories* which feature the author as the primary character and the author's personal experiences as the primary events. In contrast, *organizational narratives* are authored by organizational workers and administrators and focus on characters taken as instances of typical organizational clients, be they prisoners or patients, students or sociopaths. *Institutional* narratives are authored primarily within policy hearings (government, business, legal) by policy makers and by those who testify. These stories offer images of the problem to be resolved by policy as well as of the categories of people and the types of events policy targets. Finally, *cultural* narratives are stories circulating throughout social life. As with organizational and institutional narratives, cultural narratives primarily feature disembodied characters who are *type*s of people in *types* of situations with *types* of experiences. Yet unlike organizational and institutional narratives authored by particular categories of people, cultural narratives often have multiple authors who may or may not be working together to author a story; authors may be unknown. Also, unlike organizational and institutional narratives authored and told in particular sites, cultural narratives circulate on all stages of social life—they are found in media, textbooks, advertisements, speeches, popular culture, social advocacy documents, and so on.

Although it is possible to *analytically* distinguish among narratives on different stages of social life, in practice, stories are *reflexive*: The characteristics of stories produced on any one stage of social life simultaneously are

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influenced by as well as influence the characteristics of stories produced on other stages.[4]

NARRATIVE MEANING-MAKING

Narrative is a *meaning-making* communication form. This ability to create meaning is increasingly important in a world where meaning is neither fixed nor supported by historical or institutional structures, where there is little agreement about what is right and what is wrong, about how the world works, and about how it should work. Stories within such a world can create three kinds of meanings: Stories create *cognitive* meanings when plots link events into sequences that can be evaluated as meaningful; stories create *emotional* meanings when characters/events encourage emotional reactions; stories create *moral* meanings when characters/events encourage thinking/feeling about what is right and what is wrong. In consequence, narrative is a particularly powerful communication form because it has the ability to appeal *simultaneously* to thinking, feeling, and moral evaluation.[5]

The meaning-making potentials of stories are important throughout social life. How is it possible, for example, to create and maintain a relatively stable sense of self? Many observers argue that this is very difficult in the current era where rapid and constant change, disagreements, and a lack of institutional or community support can lead to an instability in self-understandings. A primary way to achieve an adequate sense of personal identity is through authoring *self-stories* which are stories centering on the author and the author's experiences. Such stories construct meaning from what otherwise might seem random, meaningless experiences; such stories can string together past, present, and anticipated futures into a coherent, meaningful whole.[6]

Or, how is it possible to know how to think, feel, and act toward people, objects, and events that are not known through personal experience? The less possible it is to base cognitive, emotional, moral, and behavioral reactions on practical experience, the more there is no choice but to understand the world around us as instances of *categories* of people, objects, and events. Images of the contents of these categories typically come from stories encountered throughout life. Understandings of story characters and plots can be tools to make sense of encounters and experiences in a complex, constantly changing world filled with strangers.

Stories therefore are a meaning-making communication form that can be used to make sense of self and the surrounding world. This *meaning-making* capability of stories has many other uses: Teachers from preschool to college

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know that knowledge packaged in story form is an effective way to teach; cognitive researchers find that information in storied form is more easily retained than information in other forms; religious leaders know that stories best convey complex moral lessons. Narratives also can create *justifications*: Stories justify why people in particular social categories are accorded specific levels of moral worth, why public resources are spent in one way rather than another. Still further, with their potentials to create cognitive, emotional, and moral meanings, stories are a basic tool of *persuasion* across the social landscape including in civic life, government, law, medicine, and business.[7] Social activists, for example, typically create stories as ways to convince publics that a condition is at hand causing such intolerable harm that public resources are necessary to eliminate it; public health workers use stories to persuade publics to engage in—or refrain from—particular behaviors; lawyers rely on stories to persuade juries that clients are innocent or guilty.[8]

It is not surprising that observers throughout the social sciences and in a variety of professions are interested in understanding narrative as a communication form because stories do important work on all stages of social life. What work stories do and how stories do this work are questions for social research.

NARRATIVE AUTHORS AND AUDIENCES

Stories require two categories of people: First, there are those who author stories, either as individuals or as organizational agents (politicians, activists, advertisers, lawyers, journalists, social service agency workers, and so on). At times, knowing aspects of authors' positionality can be useful information for understanding story content and story purpose. Yet socially circulating stories often have multiple authors; stories circulating in public life can be changed with each retelling; authors can be disguised or invisible; authors can occupy multiple, often conflicting positionalities. For such reasons, relationships between story content and story authors are best understood as empirical questions rather than as unexamined assumptions.

Stories also need an *audience*, people who encounter (hear, see, read) and evaluate them. This might be an internal audience of the self; it might be a limited number of specific others such as friends or family, a specific category of person (such as readers of a particular blog or voters in a particular district), or an unspecified generic (the public, Americans). Questions about audiences can be quite complicated in the current era where diversity in audiences means that story characteristics praised by some will be condemned by others. Further, socially important stories in the current era can have two audiences: The audience for whom the story was intended, and the audience encountering

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a story as relayed (and sometimes repeatedly modified) through media in its many varieties.[9]

NARRATIVE EVALUATION

Many stories authored and encountered in daily life are insignificant. They are about trivial events; they are told once or twice to family, coworkers, or friends, and then forgotten. What distinguishes such inconsequential stories from those that go on to shape social movements or public policy, that become widely accepted justifications for war or for peace, for harsh or accepting treatment of immigrants? This question is about the characteristics of *good stories* which I will define as stories with *potentials* to be evaluated as believable and important by relatively large audiences and therefore with *potentials* to become resources for meaning-making based on thinking, feeling, and/or moral evaluation.

Story evaluation is influenced by story *performance*: How, where, and by whom is the story told? Socially circulating ideas about who has the right to tell stories and about whose stories should be believed necessarily influence story evaluation. A good story is one evaluated as told by an appropriate person in an appropriate manner, in an appropriate place, to an appropriate audience.[10]

I will focus on evaluations of story *content*. Obviously, a good story is evaluated by audiences as *interesting* and *important* simply because stories evaluated as not interesting or as not important will be ignored. A story reaching a threshold of perceived interest and importance has the potential for becoming a good story if it is evaluated as *believable*, as judged through comparing perceived story contents to practical experience, common sense, and understandings of morality.[11]

Critically, a story is evaluated as *true* to the extent that it is believable, and it is believable to the extent that it is evaluated as relatively conforming to common sense, practical experiences, and moral evaluations. Story truth therefore is experiential, emotional, and moral. What is absolutely essential in narrative research is accepting what we all know from practical experience: There is *no necessary relationship* between story truth and truth as objectively measured or as grounded in the evaluations of officially certified "experts." The ways in which stories achieve evaluations of believability is an empirical question.

NARRATIVE AND CULTURE

Any question about stories can be examined or understood only by placing story making, storytelling, and story evaluating within culture. While "culture" can be defined in many ways, I will define it as *systems of meanings* that

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can be used by social actors to accomplish practical agendas, including those of meaning-making in its many varieties for its many purposes.[12]

Cultural systems of meaning are of two types. Those organizing ways of thinking are *symbolic codes*,[13] densely packed systems of ideas about how the world works, how the world should work, and of expected rights and relationships among people. Symbolic codes therefore are both statements of assumed fact (how the world does work, how people do act) and moral evaluations (how the world should work, how people should act). Social life can be conceptualized as dense, interlocking systems of meaning such as individualism, capitalism, family, democracy, the American way of life, victim, villain, citizen, terrorist, and hero.[14]

Cultural systems of meaning also surround emotion. Called *emotion codes*,[15] these meanings are cognitive models of what emotions are expected where, when, and by whom, as well as how emotions should be internally experienced, externally expressed, and morally evaluated. As with symbolic codes, emotion codes are systems of assumptions and expectations both about what is (how people do feel and express feelings) as well as what should be (how people should feel and express feelings).[16]

Systems of meaning shape stories in multiple ways. The social process of *storytelling*, for instance, is surrounded by expectations about where, when, and by whom what kinds of stories must be told, can be told, and cannot be told. This includes ideas about what specific categories of people (such as parents, physicians, judges) have the right to request—or demand—stories, and which categories of people (such as children, patients, defendants) have obligations to tell the stories requested. Culture also is a system of ideas about what stories should be evaluated as truthful (for example, those told by adults or by credentialed professionals) and which can be dismissed (such as stories told by children, prisoners, or by those diagnosed as incompetent).[17] Additionally, culture is a system of ideas about expected story content: Most people know that when a physician asks, "how are you," the request is for a story about health; when a lawyer says "tell us what happened" the request is for a story about the event being evaluated by the court, and so on.

Cultural meaning systems also include ideas about stories that should not or cannot be told. *Unspeakable* stories are those whose plots contain such horror (such as stories of survivors of the Holocaust or Hiroshima bombing) that those who experienced it find it too painful to tell. *Undiscussable* stories are those where a storyteller might wish to tell a story of horror yet find no audience willing to listen. *Incomprehensible* stories are those not reflecting cultural systems of meaning: Stories of "sexual harassment," for example, could not be told until there was a category called "sexual harassment"; such

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stories could not be taken seriously until sufficient numbers of people were convinced such stories were to be believed rather than assumed to be false.[18]

Culture also shapes story *content* for the obvious reason that stories can be understood by those other than their author only when they incorporate relatively shared systems of meaning. The more a story scene, characters, and plot reflect meaning systems that are widely shared and evaluated as important, the more likely the story will be positively evaluated by more than a few audience members. The more a story contains systems of meaning that are not widely shared and/or that are contentious and subject to disagreement, the more likely the story will not achieve widespread approval.

Cultural meaning systems shape the processes of story making, storytelling, and story evaluating. Yet while culture is central to understanding the work of stories, cultural meaning is *not* deterministic. Meaning systems are what ethnomethodologists refer to as "resources," they are socially circulating images, ideas, norms, values, expectations, and so on that, on a case-by-case basis, people can decide to use, modify, or ignore in order to accomplish practical agendas including those surrounding understanding self and others, as well as political, legal, or social persuasion or justification. Further, culture is fragmented rather than wholistic. Indeed, a characteristic of the current era is the apparent inability of social members to agree on much of anything. There are wide variations in the extent to which any particular meaning system is known, as well as in how particular meanings are morally evaluated by different audience segments. Because particular stories reflect particular meaning systems, it follows that the more diverse the audience, the more likely it is that *any* story will receive evaluations ranging from highly positive to highly negative.

That said, it remains that while culture is neither deterministic nor wholistic, culture is about meanings that are relatively shared and without shared meanings, stories would be understandable only to their authors. The ways in which stories reflect and perpetuate and/or challenge particular cultural meaning systems are topics for empirical investigation.

NARRATIVE AND POWER

Although many academic scholars and other professionals have discovered the importance of stories in social life, it remains that many others have not and continue to believe that narrative does not require (perhaps does not even deserve) scholarly attention because stories are a fanciful, trivial, and insignificant communication form often conveying a less than truthful image of empirical reality as scientifically measured. I would respond by arguing that, regardless of

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any relationship between story content and scientific truth, the structures and processes of power of *any* type cannot be fully understood without attending to the ways in which socially circulating narratives both reflect and perpetuate power. Narrative is about power; power runs throughout the processes of authoring, telling, and evaluating stories. Story consequences likewise can strengthen or diminish power in its many objective and subjective forms.

Power shapes *storytelling* because cultural meaning systems influence who can—and who cannot—tell what kinds of stories in what kinds of circumstances as well as whose stories likely will be believed and whose likely will be silenced or ignored. Power shapes story *content* because stories with potentials to appeal to the largest audiences will incorporate the systems of meaning shared by those in relatively privileged audience segments although these meanings often are *not* those of the powerless.

Further and critically, the *consequences* of stories are tools of both *subjective* and *objective* power. Socially circulating stories used as models of identity locate individuals in social and moral hierarchies with accompanying constellations of benefits and burdens, rights and responsibilities. Stories shaping public opinion yield public concern—or the lack of concern; public concern influences social policy, social policy confers objective and subjective benefits and burdens on particular population segments. And, organizationally sponsored stories within social service agencies become yardsticks to measure and morally evaluate characteristics of individual people using agency services and this, of course, influences how individual clients are treated and what they likely will—and will not—receive from the organization. Narrative and power are mutually created and mutually sustained.

NARRATIVE AS TOPIC IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

The narrative communication form is important on all stages of social life from the most private and personal to the most global and political. Clearly, stories are not simple "conveyers of information." On the contrary, the narrative communication form is central to the organization and processes of social life and therefore should be a topic of research. My goal in this chapter was to establish a basic vocabulary and conceptual framework amenable to treating narrative, particularly narrative content, as a research topic. While readers will need to consult other works to fill in the details of this most rudimentary frame, it seems sufficient to continue to the topic of social research: What kinds of empirical questions are posed by the presence, contents, uses, and consequences of narratives in social life?

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NOTES

1. I do not pretend to offer anything near a complete review of the existing literature which is considerable, ever expanding, and located across multiple disciplines and professions. For general treatments of narrative: Berger (1997), Berger and Quinney (2005), Bruner (1987), Ewick and Silbey (1995), Fisher (1984), Frye (1957), Gubrium and Holstein (2009), Holstein and Gubrium (2000), Loseke (2019), Polletta et al. (2011), Polkinghorne (1988). For narrative in education: Bell (2002), Young (2009); in medicine: Frank (1995); in nursing: Casey, Proudfoot, and Corbally (2016), Green (2013), Wang and Geale (2019); in law: Amsterdam and Bruner (2000), Dinerstein (2007); in public policy: Roe (1994).
2. For the victim character see Holstein and Miller (1990) and Loseke (2003). For the hero character see Bergstrand and Jasper (2018) and Klapp (1954). For the villain character see Brooks (1976) and Singer (2001).
3. Works about narrative genres include the genres of war (Smith 2005), drinking (Sandberg, Tutenges, and Pedersen 2019); social problems (Loseke 2003), romance novels (Radway 1984); nonfictional autobiographies (Gergen 1994); coming out (Klein et al. 2015), talk shows (Squire 2002); American Dream (Rowland and Jones 2007; Samuel 2012).
4. Shuman (2005) offers a compelling analysis of what happens when stories "travel" from the original storyteller to others such as journalists, researchers, and social service providers. When stories travel they can be "repackaged" to exemplify morals never intended by the storyteller.
5. Asserting that people are drawn to communication forms that can appeal simultaneously to thinking, feeling, and moral evaluation goes back to Aristotle (1926, 13–14) and is confirmed in the present day by observers who argue our "cognitive beliefs about how the world is, our moral vision of how the world should be, and our emotional attachment to that world march in close step" (Jasper 1997, 108).
6. See, for example, Becker (1997), Holstein and Gubrium (2000), Linde (1993), and Plummer (1995).
7. Andrews (2019) examines the work stories do to encourage or discourage political forgiveness; Loseke (2009) and Smith (2005) explore how presidents tell stories encouraging publics to define war as morally necessary; see Reich (2005) for the argument that political persuasion is best done through storytelling.
8. Empirical examples of relationships between stories and how social workers understand their clients include Järvinen and Anderson (2009), Emerson (1997), Loseke (2001), Marvasti (2002), and Nolan (2002). For examples of how institutional narratives justify policy see Balch and Balabanova (2011), Barton (2007), Keeton (2015), Stewart (2012). Considerable research demonstrates how stories are the most effective form of public health communication (Frank et al. 2015, McQueen et al. 2011). Observers of social movements have been particularly attuned to the importance of stories to social

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movement organization (Davis 2002, Fine 2002), especially to how narratives mobilize both movement participants (Lauby 2016, Powell 2011) and general publics (Burchardt 2016).

9. Most obviously, stories taken out of the context of their telling can radically transform their meaning; there can be wholesale changes in images of narrative plots, characters, and morals as stories are told and retold.
10. Much of this interest in the social processes of storytelling comes from scholars of performance studies. See Alexander (2017) and Polletta et al. (2011) for sociologically centered treatments of narrative performance criteria.
11. As succinctly stated by Joseph Davis, a believable story, "is one that makes sense given what audiences think they know, what they value, what they regard as appropriate and promising" (2002, 17–18).
12. I am drawing from Anne Swidler (1986, 273) who defined culture as "publicly available symbolic forms"; Eviatar Zerubavel's (1996, 428) notion of culture as "impersonal archipelagos of meaning…share[d] in common," and Clifford Geertz (1973, 5) who defined culture as "webs of significance." Culture, in this sense, is systems of meaning that are important because they can be understood as a "tool kit" (Swidler 1986) or a "collection of stuff" (DiMaggio 1997) that social members can use, modify, or ignore in order to make sense of selves, others, and the world around us.
13. What I am calling symbolic codes go by other names including interpretive codes (Cerulo 1998), ideological codes (Smith 1999), and collective representations (Durkheim 1961).
14. There is a considerable literature examining systems of meaning such as those surrounding democracy (Alexander and Smith 1993), individualism (Bellah et al. 1985), American values (Hutcheson et al. 2004), victim (Holstein and Miller 1990, Best 1997), terrorist (Flopp 2002), and villain (Brooks 1976, Loseke 2009, Singer 2001).
15. Stearns and Stearns (1985) call these systems of meaning emotionologies; Gordon (1990) calls them emotional cultures; Hochschild (1979) calls them feeling rules, framing rules, and display rules.
16. The considerable literature unpacking the contents of emotion codes includes the codes of sympathy (Clark 1997), empathy (Ruiz-Junco 2017), jealousy (Stearns 1990), anger (Lambek and Solway 2001), and fear (Altheide 2002).
17. Excellent summaries of culture and storytelling can be found in Ewick and Silbey (1995), Linde (2010), and Polletta et al. (2011).
18. Stein (2009) and Simic (2003) discuss the characteristics of untellable and undiscussable stories.

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