

Varieties of Narrative Analysis

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Analyzing Popular Beliefs About Storytelling

Francesca Polletta

Storytelling is shaped by its institutional context. People tell their stories differently in a loan office than they do in a bar with friends; differently in a doctor's office than in a psychotherapist's office; differently in small claims court than in a Catholic confessional. The institutional context affects where you begin your story, what events and characters you include, where you locate the dramatic reversal, and what moral point you extract from your story. The institutional context sometimes determines whether you are even allowed to tell a story—or whether you are allowed *not* to tell a story. The institutional context determines whether the response to your story is a diagnosis, a legal verdict, or an expression of sympathy. Finally, the institutional context determines how your story will be evaluated: by its factual accuracy or the candor of its insights, by its familiarity or its novelty.

As several scholars have pointed out, we can learn a great deal about how storytelling works and what it accomplishes by paying attention to the context of stories' telling. We can understand how institutional selves are created (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Plummer, 1995) and how institutional boundaries are maintained (Polletta, 1998; Brown, 1994). We can see power in the ability to lay down the rules of storytelling and inequality in people's

capacity to follow them (Blommaert, 2001; Briggs, 1992). We can see efforts to negotiate and resist power in people's unwillingness to narrate the selves that are expected of them (Bumiller, 1988; Loseke, 2001).

The claim that stories are shaped by their institutional context is right, I believe. But it is also incomplete in several ways. In addition to the fact that people can draw on storytelling norms from diverse settings (Holstein & Gubrium 2000), particular settings are often governed by multiple, ambiguous, and/or conflicting storytelling norms. For example, the organizers of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission understood storytelling in psychotherapeutic terms. They believed that black South Africans who recounted their stories of brutalities at the hands of white South African police would experience the healing that would enable them to move on in their lives (Andrews, 2007). But many participants understood the setting as more of a legal one, where blame should be assessed and those held responsible should be punished. Participants were deeply frustrated by their experience of the commission. In other words, the ambiguity of the setting—psychotherapeutic or legal—created conflicting expectations about what storytelling could accomplish there.

There is another sense in which the notion that storytelling is institutionally structured is incomplete. Coexisting with the institutional norms of storytelling are popular beliefs about how stories work and what they are good for. These beliefs are sometimes consistent with beliefs embedded in institutional norms of storytelling, but they are also sometimes at odds with them. For example, in their study of small claims court interactions, Conley and O'Barr (1985; 1990) found that although litigants were invited by judges to tell their stories, when they did so, they often lost their cases. They tended to tell the kind of story that was compelling in everyday life: a story in which an event was made sense of in terms of the social relationship of which it was in breach. But the judges, who were used to the rule-oriented accounts of the higher courts, wanted stories that represented agency and responsibility in straightforward chains of causality.

What are the effects of the inconsistency between popular and institutional norms of storytelling? In small claims court, claimants were ill-served by it. On the other hand, attorneys have generally sought to work with rather than challenge jurors' beliefs that true stories are coherent, unambiguous, temporally and logically organized, identical in their retelling, and more likely to be told by older people than younger ones (Allison, Brimacombe, Hunter, & Kadler, 2006; Bennett & Feldman, 1981; Pennington & Hastie, 1991; Scheppele, 1992). So an important question has to do with when institutions accommodate popular beliefs and when they refuse them. But another question is whether some people are more vulnerable to the conflict

between popular and institutional norms than others. Conley and O'Barr (1990) found that women were less likely to tell the kind of rule-oriented accounts that judges expected. But Wodak (1985) observed that the judge in a vehicular manslaughter case helped a male defendant tell an appropriate story. By contrast, a woman defendant in a similar case was treated dismissively and then was levied a steeper penalty than was the man. In other words, narrative competence is socially stratified, and institutional personnel play an active role in producing that stratification.

Another possibility is that doubts about narrative's value may surface more when some people tell stories than when others do. Lower status storytellers may be more likely to trigger concerns about stories' plausibility, generalizability, or seriousness than higher status storytellers. Higher status storytellers may not even be heard as telling stories. Rather, their utterances may be heard as facts. Alternatively, doubts about narrative may surface on some occasions rather than others. If doubts are likely to surface on occasions where traditionally disadvantaged people, in particular, can stand to benefit from telling stories, then in that case too, disadvantaged people are hurt by the social organization of storytelling's authority (Polletta, 2006). Power thus inheres not only in hegemonic stories but in the stratified distribution of the ability to use stories effectively.

These possibilities raise thorny methodological questions. How does one get at popular beliefs about storytelling? And how does one ascertain their effects? Certainly, one can ask people about their views of stories as compared to, say, arguments, explanations, or statistics. One can ask people to judge what counts as a story and what counts as a good story, as Stein and Policastro (1984) did. Their study revealed that people expect stories to involve goal-directed behavior by an animate protagonist, and good stories to have a protagonist confronting obstacles. Alternatively, one can extract assessments of stories from transcripts of everyday conversation. For example, Stokoe and Edwards (2007) analyzed a segment of a conversation between a father, mother, and daughter. It revealed common views of storytelling: for example, the belief that stories have proper endings ("hguh! (No) I wanna tell Daddy thuh rest of thuh story" [p. 72]) and that stories are one-sided (after Dad comments that Mom always uses cheese in her cooking and Mom replies "you (c'n) never have too much cheese," Dad responds, "Yeah. Well [that's] your story [p. 77]). One can compare the stories that people tell and the stories that institutional personnel seem to want them to tell, which Conley and O'Barr (1985; 1990) did in the context of small claims court. The authors cautioned that they could not match storytelling strategies with case outcomes (Conley & O'Barr, 1985). But by studying the verbal and behavioral reactions of judges to the stories that claimants told,

they were able to capture some of the effects of the discrepancy between institutionally appropriate stories and those that were told.

Stories and Reasons in Public Deliberation

In the project that I will describe here, my collaborator John Lee and I attempted to capture popular beliefs about storytelling and the effects of those beliefs by doing three things: (1) We analyzed just *when* people participating in an online public deliberative forum told stories rather than made arguments—that is, in relation to which topics or on which discursive occasions; (2) we analyzed how people talked *about* stories as a rhetorical form during their discussions in the forum; and (3) based on interviews with participants, we identified personal stories that *might have been told* persuasively but were not told. Together, these analyses reveal strong ambivalence about personal storytelling. People in the forum saw personal stories as normatively powerful but politically unserious, as universal in their ramifications but dangerously subjective, and as authentic but deceptive. The effects of this ambivalence, I believe, were to restrict storytelling to occasions that were seen as having little impact on the policymaking process.

In the following, I describe the project briefly and then describe the analyses that Lee and I conducted. In the process, I draw attention to several things I learned about analyzing narratives in society, namely, the difficulty of isolating narratives in discourse, the value of combining quantitative analysis of the distribution of stories with qualitative analysis of the conversational exchanges in which stories appear, and the yields of comparing narrative with other discursive forms in determining their typical uses and effects.

The Project

The lines of analysis I describe here are one component of a project that investigated how people use stories in public deliberation. In recent years, scholars and, increasingly, officials have converged on the idea that giving people the opportunity to talk about matters of public concern with fellow citizens produces better policies as well as citizens who are more informed, engaged, and invested in their political institutions (for a review, see Polletta & Lee, 2006; Chambers, 2003). But what *kind* of talk fosters those things? Scholars disagree. Some believe that proper deliberation should be oriented to *reasons*. Participants in a deliberative forum should back up their opinions

with universal principles, like equality or efficiency. Personal stories are too subjective, idiosyncratic, and vague in their policy implications to be the basis of good deliberation (Dryzek, 2000; Miller, 2002). On the other side of the debate are those who believe in the value of personal storytelling, especially for disadvantaged groups. Personal storytelling is more accessible than is an abstract discourse of reason-giving. But it is also capable of making understandable and compelling the experiences of marginalized groups, in a way that abstract principles simply are not (Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000).

So which side is right? With public deliberative forums proliferating, and tens of thousands of Americans participating in them each year (Gastil & Levine, 2005), the question has become an eminently practical one. To try to answer it, John Lee and I studied how people used reasons and personal stories in an actual deliberative forum. In August 2002, almost a year after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, over 800 people discussed online what should be built on the site of the destroyed buildings. The forum was sponsored by a coalition of New York City civic groups and Lower Manhattan rebuilding authorities and extended over the course of two weeks. Twenty-five groups of people, who were recruited by way of advertisements, nonprofit organizations, and word of mouth, discussed preliminary plans for the site of the former World Trade Center. They also discussed housing, transportation, and economic development issues and plans for a memorial for the victims of the attack. Periodically in their discussions, groups summarized their conclusions, which were forwarded to rebuilding authorities. (For a fuller discussion of the forum and of the larger debate over Ground Zero, see Polletta & Wood, 2005.)

We were interested in who told stories, in what contexts they told stories, and in the responses that stories elicited. We wondered if stories enabled people to gain a hearing for opinions and priorities that were typically marginalized in policy discussions. Did people from traditionally disadvantaged groups use stories more than those who were not? Did they use the term “stories” to articulate unfamiliar or minority opinions? And did other people respond seriously and favorably to them? A counterhypothesis would be that stories just “sat there,” perceived as too personal or trivial to be engaged in discussing policy options. A third hypothesis, however, would be that stories’ authority was variable. When higher status participants told stories, they were listened to; when lower status participants did, they were not. We wanted to appraise all three hypotheses.

We were fortunate to have several kinds of data. Since people were assigned to the 25 groups in a way that maximized their diversity, and since the groups followed the same agenda, we were able to treat them as 25 instances of deliberation. We randomly chose 12 groups whose discussions

we coded for stories, reasons, and responses. The fact that participants both introduced themselves at the beginning of the dialogue and had access to members' bios throughout the dialogues meant that, in most cases, they knew each other's gender and at least something about their background. In addition to the discussions, we had access to demographic data on all participants. Finally, a search feature on the dialogue website allowed us to search all 25 groups' discussions for references to *story*, *stories*, or *narrative*. This allowed us to analyze not only how people talked with narratives but also how they talked *about* them.

I have discussed our coding strategies elsewhere (Polletta & Lee, 2006). Here I want to make mention of the fact that deciding what counted as a story in the discussions proved much more difficult than we had anticipated. We were interested in stories told in connection with voicing an opinion. Accordingly, we used *narrative claims* to mean opinions or preferences that were advanced by way of stories (I use the terms *narrative* and *story* interchangeably). To identify stories, we used Labov and Waletzky's (1967) definition of a narrative as an account of a past sequence of events in the order in which they occurred to make a point. We instructed coders to look for the following four things to code text as a narrative: (1) The account was told from the point of view of the narrator and described something that happened either to him or her or to someone else. (2) There was an orientation, an indication of the setting of the events recounted. (3) There was at least one temporal juncture. A temporal juncture consisted of at least two independent clauses whose "reversal . . . results in a change in the listener's interpretation of the order of the events described" (Labov, 1997, p. 2). At least one of the clauses responded implicitly to the question, "And what happened then?" (4) There was some evaluation of the events recounted. This was an implicit answer to the question, "So what?" which could occur at any point in the account.

Here are two examples of posts that we coded as narrative claims.

Example 1:

As I stated in my bio, my youngest child, Paul, was murdered on Sept. 11. He was attending [a] conference at Windows on the World. He did not even work at the WTC. He was only 25 years old, standing on the brink of a wonderful future. Though Paul is dead, as a parent, my need to care for him has not gone away. To that end, I became the co-chairperson of the Memorial Committee [. . .]

All this started by my wanting to see Paul's name etched in stone. Many people resent calling Ground Zero a cemetery, but in fact, many people's remains have not been found, including Paul, and this site will be their last

resting place. I want to see a respectful and dignified memorial. I want to see a museum that will tell future generations what happened in NY on Sept. 11. I don't want this event remembered as a mass murder, but the loss of many individual human souls. A museum will give a human face to this tragedy. I want Ground Zero to become a meaningful place that will honor those murdered as well as create a vital neighborhood in the city Paul truly loved. My immediate reaction cannot be described. I am no longer the person I once was and I will never ever recover from the fact that Paul will not be able to live out his life . . . and he truly loved life. (Listening to the City, n.d.)

Note: All quotations in the following are from this source.)

Example 2:

Hmmmmmm. At first I was very gun-ho about rebuilding the towers. I, like many, thought that to not rebuild the towers was to "let the terrorists win" and I also feared that what was lost could only be replaced by rebuilding them exactly as they were. But as time passed and information surfaced about the possibilities I began to change my mind. Now I am 100% for rebuilding but I do not think we should rebuild the towers.

The story of the first writer's son backed up her preferences for the memorial and a museum but it did so by recounting how she came to hold those preferences, an account that took the form of a tragic but literarily familiar story of a parent's loss of a child. It was easy to code the extract as a narrative. The second extract, however, was more complicated. It departed from the Labovian standard that narratives be about events, about things that are done rather than said or thought (Toolan, 2001). Instead, in this story, the movement was perceptual or emotional: the "and then" referred to an effect on the teller's inner state. We expected that stories like this would be common in the forum because participants were talking about translating meaning into concrete structures. Accordingly, we suspended the Labovian requirement that the core reversal in the story should involve actions rather than perceptions. We ended up suspending another Labovian requirement: that stories be about a single set of events. Forum participants often described what Linde (1986) called "recurring or constant patterns of events" (p. 186). Participants described how they walked around the World Trade Center site before the disaster, talked about what they enjoyed doing in their neighborhood, and so on. These were not recaptulations of a one-time series of events, but they were often introduced as if they were stories (preceded, for example, by statements like "I remember" or "when I was a young man"). We coded them as "habitual" narratives (Linde, 1986, p. 186).

We were unable to deal with a third kind of story-like utterance, however: the story that was alluded to rather than told. For example, one poster wrote in a discussion of housing, "I live in an area that has recently been 'discovered,' plus I am a child of a family that was 'urban renewed' out of an area in a large city, so I'm a little sensitive to 'market rate' discussions". Each of the terms she put in quotations seemed to refer to a story that she expected her audience to know. One was about how urban renewal displaced long-standing neighborhoods of minority and working class residents, and one was about the people whose rents were going up because their neighborhood had become attractive to middle class, usually white, residents. The power of such stories lay in part in the fact that they were known—the poster knew she did not have to tell them—even though they were glossed over by positive terms like *renewal* and *discovery*. We suspected that allusions to stories played important roles in the discussions, but we were not able to figure out a way to capture them systematically.

I will mention a few other coding categories we used. Along with narrative claims, we coded all *non-narrative claims*—that is, opinions or preferences that were backed up with a reason rather than a story. Reasons could be practical ("that option has worked elsewhere"), normative ("that is the democratic thing to do"), or symbolic ("that option signals our commitment to environmental sustainability"). To detect whether participants used stories to advance marginalized views, we coded whether participants contrasted their opinions and experiences with those of other people. We identified a *minority perspective* where the poster explicitly distinguished his or her experience or opinion from that of another group of people. For example, the dialogue participant we quoted previously noted, "Many people resent calling Ground Zero a cemetery, but in fact, many people's remains have not been found, including Paul, and this site will be their last resting place . . ." In telling Paul's story, this writer sought to communicate a point of view she saw as unlike that of other people, namely those who resented calling Ground Zero a cemetery. In other messages, prefatory comments such as, "I guess I'm in the minority for thinking . . .", "I am also opposed to some people . . .", "The difference I have . . .", "I actually have a different reaction . . .", "I know it will sound strange, but I think . . ." signaled minority perspectives.

To determine the topics in relation to which people told stories rather than gave reasons, we identified the discussion thread in which each claim appeared. We were especially interested in whether and how people used stories in threads that were devoted to housing, transportation, and economic development policies for the site. Such threads could be seen as more technical or at least as focused on more specific policies. To investigate the reception

accorded to reasons and stories (and to reasons and stories used by different people), we coded every response to a claim that appeared in the same thread as the claim (participants did not often post responses in other threads). We were especially interested in responses that *engaged* the claim made by way of a story or a reason—for example, by agreeing or disagreeing with the claim, questioning or elaborating on it, or acknowledging its impact. Responses like these indicated the kind of give and take that deliberation requires. We used logistic regression models to predict the likelihood that each type of claim was responded to and the likelihood that each one was engaged. We also estimated the likelihood that claims were responded to or engaged when the claims were made by disadvantaged speakers, advanced minority perspectives, and were advanced in targeted policy discussions.

Analyzing Why People Tell Stories

Our quantitative analysis proved useful in showing the distribution of storytelling relative to reason-giving across speakers, topics, kinds of opinions, and kinds of responses. To go beyond those broad patterns, though, and to figure out just how people used stories and with what effect, we selected typical patterns to analyze more closely. In the following, I discuss two sets of findings. One has to do with the surprising uses to which people put stories. The other has to do with the surprising (or, in the end, not so surprising) limits they put on telling stories.

In general, people backed up their opinions with reasons rather than stories. Narrative claims accounted for just 11% (182) of the 1,597 claims that were made in the 12 groups. Fully 76% of the 4,913 messages that we read did not contain any claims at all. In those messages, participants advanced opinions without backing them up, recalled personal experiences, reported news that they had heard about the rebuilding process, or commented on other participants' posts without making a claim of their own. When participants did make claims and used stories to do so, their stories were usually in the first person (76%). Although some were about the narrator's experience of 9/11 or about its impacts on his or her life, most of the stories (77%) related to redevelopment options and less traumatic experiences: for example, stories about changes in the narrator's neighborhood over the years, visits to other memorials, the narrator's use of amenities in Lower Manhattan before the disaster, good and bad commuting experiences, the narrator's experience of local politics, and so on.

Were stories used disproportionately by disadvantaged groups? Unfortunately, the relatively small number of participants without a college

degree, earning less than \$50,000 per year, or who were not white made it hard to tell. However, women were more likely than men to make narrative claims. Controlling for other variables, women were 1.72 times as likely as men to make narrative rather than non-narrative claims. (This and other regression results were reported in Polletta & Lee, 2006). In other words, whereas a claim made by a woman had a 12% chance of being narrative, a claim by a man had an 8% chance of being narrative. We had worried that women's use of stories might be ineffective. Women might be more comfortable using a form that is widely seen as more accessible, but using that form might further discredit their claims. However, that did not seem to be the case. Narrative claims, whether made by men or women, were three times more likely to be engaged than non-narrative ones.

There was an even more striking finding in our analysis of who used stories. Participants who saw themselves as having a minority opinion, whether they were men or women, were more than five times as likely to make a narrative claim as were those who did not. Why? Why would people use stories rather than reasons to advance opinions they thought were unfamiliar or unpopular? One plausible answer might be that stories are more persuasive than reasons. Especially when you are trying to convince someone of something they are not likely to believe, you use all the rhetorical tools at your disposal. Stories, with their engaging and emotional quality would seem effective for those purposes. And indeed, stories' persuasive power has been demonstrated in experimental studies (Green & Brock, 2000; Slater & Rouner, 2002).

We decided to examine the messages and exchanges in which such stories appeared in order to figure out whether this was indeed how stories were being used. Of course, we could not tell what people's intentions were in telling a story. However, we believed that by studying the discursive context of the story—both the context of the message in which the story appeared and the context of the exchange among participants in which the message appeared—we could approximate what people were doing with stories.

People seemed to tell stories for several reasons: to demonstrate that they had a personal stake in an issue and, therefore a reason to be listened to; to illustrate a point or a practical idea or to flesh out imaginatively the implications of a position; to warrant a new set of issues as worthy of discussion; and to elicit empathy for their experience and, therefore, their opinion. These uses could all fall under the category of "persuasive." But we were also struck by the fact that people often told stories less to persuade people to adopt their opinions than to figure out just what their opinions were. Storytellers invited collaboration in drawing lessons from their experiences.

In some cases, narrators recounted their experiences to account for feelings about what should be built at the site that they had not yet connected to a principled opinion. For example, one participant recounted her refusal to apply for a job in the World Trade Towers after the 1993 bombing. Then she went on, "I can't really explain it, but NOW I would work in the new building, on the top floors." Another writer used a story to identify a feeling that she hoped could be translated into a design principle. She described a friend taking a boat ride around Manhattan. When the boat reached the site of the former World Trade Towers, passengers became silent. "It's this reverence that needs to be addressed", she observed.

Democratic theorists would have us believe that people know what their opinions are, what principles justify their opinions, and what policy options best match their principles. People may change their minds over the course of a discussion, but they move from one well-defined position to another. In reality, however, people often don't know what their opinions are (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002). Their experiences may have given a strong feeling about an issue but not a defined preference. Or there may be no obvious principle to justify their preferences, or no clear policy options that line up with their preferences. I suspect that stories help people to figure out those things for a couple of reasons. One reason is that stories are both normative (they make a point) and allusive (the point they make is rarely obvious). Indeed, the story's point may not even be obvious to the person telling it. Conversational analysts have found that when people tell their stories, their listeners often participate in interpreting and even retelling the story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Jefferson, 1978; Sacks, 1992). The point of the story may be offered by the narrator and then modified or amplified by listeners. Or the narrator's audience may supply the point of an account that the narrator presented as ambiguous. People may tell stories in deliberation with just this possibility in mind.

In our analysis of stories in exchanges, we also came to believe that narrative helped with another crucial requirement of deliberation: that people disagree with each other. If people with diverse opinions are to talk about competing solutions to a problem, they will and should disagree sometimes. But people are notoriously unwilling to do so. They take disagreement as a challenge, as impolite, as uncomfortable (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Mansbridge, 1983). Telling a story, we came to believe, may help people to disagree without experiencing disagreement as antagonism.

We arrived at this conclusion in a roundabout way. In our analysis of the responses to narrative and non-narrative claims, we found that a frequent response to a story was to corroborate it (18% of narrative claims were

corroborated, compared to only 1% of non-narrative claims), often by telling another story. When we analyzed these exchanges, in which a story was followed by another story, we were struck by the fact that the second story often seemed to make a quite different point than the first one. The second storyteller introduced the story by saying something like, "That's my experience too" or "My thoughts exactly!" But then the story described a different experience or described a similar experience in a way that yielded a different conclusion. In no case, however, did that difference prompt the first storyteller to say that the second was misinterpreting his or her point. To the contrary, and much to our surprise, the second, contrasting story seemed to be appreciated for offering a different point of view without anyone acknowledging that it was doing so.

Let me give an example. In one discussion thread, participants were criticizing the tourists descending on Ground Zero. A former Manhattan resident told a story of returning with her husband and children to visit the site. She described her fury at the tourists and then her shame at realizing that she was now one herself. Another participant responded, "My thoughts exactly!" and then told of a friend coming to visit who was adamant about seeing Ground Zero. Far from critical of her friend, though, the writer empathized with her, explaining, "She needed to comprehend it all. It's one thing to see it on TV or in the paper, but to be there . . . and to see St. Paul's [the chapel adjacent to the site] . . . it's different." This writer announced that the story she was about to tell corroborated the one that the previous writer had told ("My thoughts exactly!"), even though it did not seem to do so. But narrative's openness to interpretation may have allowed deliberators to reformulate each other's points so as to advance another position without seeming to disagree. A third participant then wrote, "I too want to respond to the issue of 'tourists'" and recounted her experience of volunteering at St. Paul's: "We at the gate made a point of speaking to the passersby, and what became clear to me early on was that that was an important element of our ministry. Another volunteer described these 'tourists' as pilgrims, and that is how I see them too"). This author seemed to have reconciled the first two points of view by recounting her own conversion on the issue. Two more participants weighed in, both thanking the previous writers. The first one took issue with those who were critical of visitors to the site: "How ungenerous and needlessly judgmental. All I saw were witnesses and pilgrims." The second writer recounted his experience of the disaster and concluded that "people should want to come and understand it in the ways that they can". Without drawing attention to the contrasting views of tourists thus far expressed, this writer too sought to reconcile them. Visitors would

not understand as the people who lived in Lower Manhattan did, he suggested, but they should try to understand as best they could.

In the course of this series of stories, then, visiting the site was remade from a reprehensible tourist activity to an understandable and, indeed, laudable, effort to make sense of the disaster. "Tourism" had become a normative obligation. Those who criticized visitors, by contrast, were recast as "needlessly judgmental." These shifts occurred without anyone acknowledging a difference of opinion. To the contrary, each writer represented her or his view as like that of the others. Telling personal stories may have made it possible to do that without seeming inconsistent. There was enough that was similar to make each story follow on from the previous story, even though the normative point in each case was quite different.

In another exchange, a participant recounted Manhattan's early settlement, writing in part, "Economic development is very important. Since the Dutch settled here, Manhattan has always been about business. They even handed over control to the English so that business could go on [un]interrupted." The next poster wrote,

I have to agree a bit with the previous post about the settling of Manhattan and business. And what occurs to me is revitalize the transportation, the economic development will follow. The Dutch settled and Manhattan grew because of the transport afforded by the natural harbor and rivers. For better or worse, L[ong I]sland or N[ew] J[ersey] widen a highway and low and behold, more homes and business sprouts and the road gets crowded.

A third writer chimed in, "I agree with the previous posts." As in the exchange about tourists at Ground Zero, the second poster here said that he agreed with the first story, and then told a story that made a contradictory point: authorities should not subsidize business but instead improve transportation. This exchange had a different tenor than the earlier one. In that exchange, respondents' stories seemed to have been offered in emotional support to the initial storyteller. The latter exchange resembled more a kind of narrative *ju-jitsu*, in which the second speaker elaborated on the first story and added another one to extract a different moral. In both cases, however, stories allowed speakers to advance competing positions while not seeming to do so.

Storytelling thus seemed to help people to disagree, and it helped them to figure out what their opinions were in the first place. Both things are essential to effective deliberation and both are hard to do. Neither task is obviously advanced by telling stories. Only an analysis of storytelling in practice alerted us to the deliberative value of the form.

Analyzing When People Do Not Use Stories

Combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of storytelling in practice also yielded our second conclusion. Popular beliefs about stories, rather than anything intrinsic either to stories or to the institutional norms governing storytelling, limited stories' value in deliberation.

As I noted earlier, the online dialogues were organized into topical threads. Over the course of two weeks, the discussions moved from introductions to people's hopes and concerns about the redevelopment process to ideas for rebuilding to what the organizers called "specific rebuilding issues, including business development, employment, transportation, housing, parks, and other issues," and, finally, to the planned memorial. We examined the distribution of stories and reasons across those topics. We found that, controlling for other variables, participants were just over a third as likely to make a narrative claim in a thread centered on specific rebuilding issues as in a thread centered on broad development or memorial options.

In a sense, the finding is not surprising. Stories, with their moral and emotional character, their connection to the immediate and lived qualities of experience, might be better equipped for discussing topics in which values were prominent. Indeed, our own analysis suggested that people used stories to figure out their preferences about issues. Discussions of the principles that should animate the rebuilding process and of the memorial would presumably be less technical and more value-oriented. They would focus on what was important rather than what was feasible in terms of engineering or economics, on what was aesthetically desirable rather than what was legally required, and on what issues should be put on the table rather than what issues already were.

The problem with that explanation is that it suggests that decisions about housing, transportation, and economic development were only technical. That was not the case. We knew from our interviews with participants in this dialogue and in the face-to-face forum that preceded it that many participants had a real stake in decisions about where new transportation facilities would be located. Many participants were directly concerned with whether low-income housing would be built on the site, and what kinds of support would be made available to those affected financially by the disaster. Some residents of Battery Park City had signed up for the dialogues precisely because they were so concerned about a proposal to move a street in their neighborhood below ground. Small business owners might have described their struggles to survive financially before and after 9/11 as a way to talk about the inequities in grants being given by the city to retain large businesses. Had low-income residents told their stories, they might have

convinced their fellow deliberators of the importance of low- and mid-income housing in Lower Manhattan.

Indeed, the organizers may have had this in mind when they introduced the economic development discussion in a way that alluded to familiar, and sometimes poignant, stories: "In the short run, thousands of people were economically impacted because of 9/11, ranging from a Chinatown restaurant worker who barely scraped by to a store owner, to a banker who made millions. . . . How do we help them get back on their feet?" Questions about housing were similarly framed. Organizers seemed at pains to get participants to relate the issues to their personal experiences. And indeed, public deliberation professionals more generally emphasize the value of personal storytelling in public deliberation (National Issues Forum [NIF], 2001, p. 7; Study Circles, 2006, p. 62). So institutional norms supported participants' telling personal stories throughout the discussion.

Apparently, participants' own beliefs about when stories were or were not appropriate trumped those institutional norms. What were those beliefs? Did people see personal stories as bad at conveying technical information? As untrustworthy? As trivial or self-indulgent? To answer those questions, we used the dialogue's search engine to retrieve 180 references to *story*, *stories*, or *narrative* in the 25 groups. We examined those references for insight into how people characterized storytelling as a discursive form. Again, in each case, we studied the reference to storytelling in the context of an entire message and, often, an exchange of messages in order to capture the point—and often points—people were making. We grouped references into the views of storytelling as a discursive form they expressed. We wanted to tease out a kind of epistemology of the form: ideas about how narrative worked on people's emotions, cognition, rational judgment, and moral action.

What became clear were the mixed, indeed contradictory, ways in which people talked about stories. There were several lines of ambivalence. On one hand, participants appreciated stories for their capacity to elicit empathetic understanding. Hearing the stories of the victims and survivors of 9/11, participants said over and over again, would provide a deeper understanding of the disaster. It would fortify the resolve of future generations to prevent something like this from ever happening again. "As a country, we are the storytellers. It's our responsibility to redesign the WTC in a new chapter and verse. To reflect the lives lost . . . to encourage the living . . . and to bring hope to the new generation." In their capacity to evoke empathy, participants suggested, stories made it possible to truly understand people and events. But the connection between understanding and empathy could be a dangerous one. Hearing the stories of people who were repugnant might lessen the repugnance people felt for them. Participants argued strenuously

against the idea of telling the terrorists' stories as part of the 9/11 memorial. As one put it, "While historians and policy-makers may benefit us all by understanding the political and cultural forces that brought such hatred about, the memorial should simply be unequivocally clear that this was evil at work." Stories in this sense might stand in the way of moral action.

A second tension evident in participants' passing comments was between views of stories as capturing uniqueness and capturing commonality. Posters made the case for telling the stories of those who lost their lives on 9/11 by citing stories' capacity to convey what was unique about each person. But others made the point that "everyone has a story" in order to argue against the special status of any one story and, in this case, to argue that there should not be hierarchies of status in how victims of the disaster were memorialized. "I'm getting a little tired of this mass deification of police and firefighters," complained one poster. "There are stories of heroism all around." "And another: 'We all have one of those stories, some many more than one.'"

A third tension evident in people's comments was between narrative's authority and its deceptiveness. On one hand, people often referred to *the story* to refer to the facts behind the rumors. And in referring to the normative power of the stories of those who had witnessed the disaster, they treated the plausibility of those stories as beyond question. However, they also described stories as only partial in their perspective. One writer explained his disagreement with a group member by remarking, "You told one side of the story, I told the other." If there were two contradictory sides to every story, then what authority could storytelling have? Even when dialogue participants told stories to argue for particular positions, they sometimes drew attention to their stories' subjective character. For example, one participant recounted being deeply touched by the Vietnam War Memorial despite his having had no connection to the war. Yet he introduced this evocative story about the power of design to transcend subjectivity by cautioning that everyone's opinion was "subjective . . . we need to be careful." Another participant told the story of her brother going back into the towers to rescue people. She called for memorials that honored people like her brother along with the firemen and policemen who lost their lives. She introduced her story, however, by saying, "I know I might be biased."

Finally, stories were described as normatively powerful and as trivial. Future generations would "only have a story in a history book," one participant complained. Another wrote the following of the memorial:

I wish to see something that is emotionally big so that my future grandkids felt a connection to something that they would have never seen and can truly understand and remember the ramification of the event. I would like that it would be a little bit more than a story.

A third worried about how much money rebuilding the towers would cost, "Yes, we could float bonds, but is the legacy we want to leave to our children an inspiring story, a fine view and a pile of debt?" "Inspiring stories" in other words, were no match for financial imperatives in compelling action.

What should we make of these contradictions? Sociologists of culture have pointed out that people have mixed views about many cultural objects. Romantic love is at once spontaneous and demands hard work (Swidler, 2001); technology is progressive and dangerous (Ganson, 1988); statistics are objective and manipulable. Scholars have tended to see these contrasting views as giving people the flexibility to deal with complex institutions like marriage, technology, and politics. But I have long wondered whether, far from functional for everyone, mixed views of cultural objects serve some people more than others. I have wondered if the negative pole of each pair of views is more likely to surface when lower status people are using statistics or talking about love or telling stories. In the online dialogues, it seemed less that some people triggered negative assessments of storytelling and more that some topics did. Storytelling was viewed as powerful when it came to issues of culture and memory but powerless when it came to issues of policy and finance.

With what effect? As I noted, small business owners, Lower Manhattan residents, and low-income workers all had a direct stake in housing, transportation, and economic development policies in Lower Manhattan. All three groups had good reason to feel marginalized by existing policies. They might well have benefited from stories' persuasive power in discussions of housing, transportation, and economic development if stories had been seen as appropriate there. Moreover, if stories were a way for participants to clarify their own preferences as much as to gain support for them, then the fact that they were discouraged in those discussions may have made it more difficult for people to work out their preferences on those issues. Either way, the norm against storytelling—a popular norm rather than one fostered by dialogue organizers—may have reproduced a view of policy-making as expert problem-solving and as properly insulated from public input—even, paradoxically, as it was opened to public input.

Analytic Lessons

What lessons should one take away from this study about how to analyze storytelling in institutional settings? Or put otherwise, what did we do right and what did we do wrong? The first thing we did wrong was to assume that it would be easy to isolate a narrative in a chunk of discourse.

While people normally know when they are hearing a story, just how they know that is complicated. They may hear story-like utterances—say, ones that begin something like, “Well, once I was at the World Trade Tower” but do not have more than one subsequent clause—as stories (Stein & Policastro, 1984). Or they may hear them as different both from stories and non-stories. An important question for further research has to do with the interactional work done by kernel stories (Kalcik, 1975), story fragments, and allusions to stories. Do they reproduce solidarity (since we all know the story that is alluded to)? Or do they draw lines between those who are in the loop of understanding and those who are outside it? Does their ambiguity open up the possibility for new perspectives (Polletta, 2006) or does it reproduce preexisting perspectives (Feldman & Skoldberg, 2002)? Recall the example I cited at the beginning of the paper, in which a dialogue participant referred to having been “urban renewed” and having been a resident of a neighborhood that had been “discovered”—each term with quotation marks around it. She effectively conveyed two sets of stories—one set about the contrast between the ideal of urban renewal and its reality and one about the social consequences of gentrification—along with the irony that the accepted terms (“urban renewed” and “discovered”) captured only the fictional story. Those story fragments, if they can be called story fragments, did a lot of rhetorical work. It would be well worth developing ways to operationalize story-like discourse—that is, utterances that participants recognize as being story-like without conforming to the requirements of full-blown narratives.

Two things we did right were to combine quantitative and qualitative analysis of storytelling and to compare storytelling with another discursive form. We analyzed the distribution of narratives across settings, speakers, and topics, as well as the distribution of responses to narrative across those same categories. These analyses provided a broad picture of who used narrative, how they used narrative, and what responses they elicited. I should point out that it would have been impossible to do the quantitative analysis without a prior qualitative analysis of a sample of stories, reasons, and responses in order to figure out just how to code them. But the quantitative analysis was also insufficient when we turned to making sense of the patterns we identified. I do not think that we could have designed a quantitative tool that would have captured the ways in which people used stories. This was partly because of the subtlety of stories’ meaning but also because of their collaborative character. Stories’ meaning often developed over the course of several exchanges with other posters rather than inhering in the original utterance.

With respect to our comparison of storytelling and reason-giving, we were motivated by a debate among deliberative theorists about the relative merits of the two discursive forms. But more generally, I believe that scholarship on narrative would benefit from this kind of comparison. Scholars typically make claims about narrative’s persuasive, sense-making, or identity-constitutive power by focusing on features that supposedly distinguish narrative from other discursive forms. Scholars emphasize, for example, narrative’s configurational quality, its projective dimension, or its dependence on prior stories. But absent a comparison of narrative’s effects with those of other discursive forms, we have no real way of knowing whether narrative is in fact persuasive, sense-making, or identity-constitutive, and if it is, then why.

Our comparison of stories and reasons across kinds of conversations—some policy focused, others more general—proved valuable in shedding light on people’s beliefs about when stories were appropriate. I’d like to take credit for choosing a data set that allowed us to make that comparison, but it was a happy accident of the way the forum was set up. The more general lesson, however, is that analyzing the distribution of stories across topics or discursive occasions can be a good first step to accounting for what people see stories as good for. As a similar first step, I studied the distribution of stories about Martin Luther King Jr. across occasions in Congressional discourse (Polletta, 2006), and Perrin (2006) studied the distribution of stories in the conversations of groups made up variously of church members, union workers, sports club members, and businesspeople.

There are other ways to get at the popular evaluation of storytelling as a discursive form. In addition to asking people directly, or identifying beliefs about narrative in people’s talk, one might turn to the many practical guides that exist on how to tell and evaluate stories, for example, in job interviews or at parties, or as a management strategy, a teaching tool, or an organizing technique. One might use these materials to piece together a cultural common sense about storytelling and, in particular, an epistemology of the form: a set of assumptions about narrative’s relation to truth and knowing. From there, one might ask about the truth value of storytelling in other times and places. How have narrative epistemologies varied across settings, speakers, cultures, and eras? A sociology of popular beliefs about storytelling would investigate how beliefs about how stories work and what they are good for have evolved over time. It would investigate how such beliefs vary across institutions, what stands behind them, what political and social work they do, and how they shape selves and social interactions.

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II

The Empirical Analysis of Formula Stories

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This chapter explores analytic techniques for empirically examining the multiple and interlocking aspects of narrative identity in secular social orders characterized by heterogeneity, social and moral fragmentation, complexity, and anonymity. While there has been considerable interest in examining how narratives serve the inner world of humans in such environments (Gergen, 1994; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; McAdams, 1996), there has been less attention paid to exploring how narratives work and the work narratives do in an outer world characterized by social relations among people who are more or less strangers to one another. How is it possible to socially navigate through a world of strangers? Who is friend, and who is foe? What can we expect from others? What can others expect from us? How is it possible to have cognitive and emotional reactions to types of people—the terrorist, the welfare mother—when not one such person is actually known? How do these reactions to unknown others shape public policy? Such are the practical problems of identity in a world of strangers.