



Retelling Division:

A Narrative Typology of Immigrant Family Separation

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“Zero Tolerance”

- In April 2018, US President Trump announced that under his “zero-tolerance” immigration policy, families crossing the US border would be separated into adult and child detention centers (Burnett, 2019).
- How do the stories work?
- **How are the social sciences enriching and constricting narratives of immigrant family experiences?**

Theoretical Framework:

Socio-Narratology

Bruner, 1986:



Social Scientists as Storytellers

1930s story about Indigenous peoples:

- **Past:** Glorious
- **Present:** Disorganized
- **Future:** Assimilation
- Researcher shed light upon how tribal land could be sold after assimilation.
- Ignores instances of resistance

1970s story about Indigenous peoples:

- **Past:** Exploitation
- **Present:** Resistance Movement
- **Future:** Ethnic resurgence
- Researcher provided strategy to build up tribal resources.
- Ignores ways assimilation is ongoing

The Works of Stories



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- Frank, 2010
 - Make life habitable
 - Teach people who they are
 - Connect people
 - Make life good and dangerous

Questions for Analysis: How do these stories *work*?

Make life habitable

- Work as a guidance system to **select/evaluate** important aspects of experience, and structure it in time.

Teach

- Teach people who they are by **identifying** with a character.

Connect

- Connect diverse groups of people by **uniting** under common agreements and glossing over points of contention.

Good and Dangerous

- **Genre:** shows what is at stake. **Low-mimetic**
 - *Mundane, everyday. Low threat.*
- **Tragedy/Romance**
 - *Tragedy emphasizes descent and struggle, romance emphasizes upward transformation of hero. Medium threat.*
- **Apocalyptic**
 - *Polarized characters, good vs. evil. Highest amplified threat level.*

Methods



Typology

Social science literature on **immigrant families**, with at least one **undocumented parent, separated** in the **United States**.

Identifies the types of narratives that appear around an event.

Considers not only the content of the story, but the act of storytelling.

Recognizes how people interact with narrative resources, like plot and genre, to conceptualize the event.

How do stories work?

Make life *habitable*

How do storytellers transform experiences into stories?

Emplotment

Teach people *who they are*

How are stories situated among other stories?

Inner Library

Narrative Habitus

With whom do stories call upon the listener to identify?

Interpellation

Narrative Identifying

Subject Position

Connect people

How do stories maintain community?

Narrative conformity

Narrative induction

How do stories assemble a group of people?

Fabrication mechanism

Good and Dangerous

How do stories move the audience to action?

Genre

Narrative inflation

How do stories illustrate boundaries?

Boundaries



Types & Analysis: Fallen Democracy

Disciplines: Sociology, Education, Law

Methods: Survey, observation, policy review

Plot (past, present, future):

- The state was just and accountable, humanely offering sanctuary to immigrant families.
- Then, after administration and policy changes, the state grew irrational and tyrannical, shamefully infringing on the family unity rights of immigrants through deportations and detentions.
- Looking forward, the state may either descend into tyranny, or be uplifted into a just democracy by professional intervention.



Teach

- Socially engaged intellectual
- Encourage intellectual audience to engage scientific training in civic responsibility.

Connect

- Fabricates a unified, apolitical group by keeping criminality ambiguous.
- Construction of “illegal” immigrant is neglected, keeping the figure of the criminal separate from figure of the immigrant.

Good & Danger

- *Apocalyptic* deflated to *romance*
- Apocalyptic: State struggles between democracy (good) and tyranny (evil).
- Romance: Intellectuals cannot transform the government, but can intervene to empower immigrant families.

How do stories
work?:
*Fallen
Democracy*

Types & Analysis: Corrupted Innocence

Disciplines: psychiatry, psychology, sociology, social work, health and human services, and medicine.

Methods: Surveys, standardized clinical instruments, mixed-methods semi-structured interviews.

Plot:

- Undocumented parent is arrested before being detained and/or deported, or begins to fear such an arrest.
- Undocumented or Citizen-Child's mental health declines and their future is jeopardized.
- Practitioners must intervene to restore the child's mental health and advocate for policy changes that protect the child during arrest.



Teach

- Practitioners are called to recognize a helpless self in the passive patient children.
- Can position self within either or both layers of helplessness (dependent child or patient waiting to be healed).

Connect

- Unifies practitioners of various fields and political backgrounds as rational helpers of dependent children
- Sole arbiters of child's "best interests"

Good & Danger

- *Apocalyptic* deflated to *low-mimetic*
- Child vs Illness = Innocence vs Corruption.
- Role of professionals is to help children accept separation as normalcy.



How do stories
work?:
*Corrupted
Innocence*

Comparison:

Implications for Immigrant Families

Empowerment

- Fallen Democracy
 - Immigrant families are empowered by family unity policies, yet remain disempowered by states systems of immigration control.
- Corrupted Innocence
 - Storyteller expresses compassion for the child, providing lowest form of empowerment through the body (compared to total disempowerment of the family).

Identity Politics (Davis, 1998).

- Fallen Democracy
 - Immigrant family identity is fixed as culturally, legally, economically “other”.
- Corrupted Innocence
 - Patient child identity is fixed as disabled.

Treating the Symptoms

- Fallen Democracy
 - Immigrant families can maintain unity if policies are changed, but criminalization of immigration (and how it serves economic and political systems) is neglected.
- Corrupted Innocence
 - Social disorder acknowledged as a factor to biological disorder (mental health), but recommendations focus on medical resolution, rather than addressing systemic causes of family separation (see Kleinman, 1995).

Future Directions:

How can research enrich representations of immigrant family experiences?

– **Reflexivity**

- Considering one's own relationship to the research.
- Engage in dialogue with a plurality of stories to **avoid finalization** (reducing a person to a particular quality):
 - *Understand each story of immigrant families as a rigid evaluation of time, and consider what other evaluations exist to create a complex, relaxed representation.*
 - *Interpret work beyond the scope of one's narrative habitus.*
- Claim no privilege of **interpretive authority**
 - *Recognize paradigms of understanding other than one's own and their contexts.*

Limitations

- Language
 - Articles were only in English. Articles in other languages may employ different stories and concepts than those presented.
- Sample size
 - Larger sample size would reveal more narrative forms and provide more detail on those presented.
- Availability
 - Limited to access through the University of Saskatchewan library.
- Singular Framework
 - Integration of more frameworks would create a stronger fabric of interpretation.

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