Retelling Division:
A Narrative Typology of Immigrant Family Separation

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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

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*?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Make life habitable</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Work as a guidance system to <strong>select/evaluate</strong> important aspects of experience, and structure it in time.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Teach</th>
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<td>• Teach people who they are by <strong>identifying</strong> with a character.</td>
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<th>Connect</th>
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<td>• Connect diverse groups of people by <strong>uniting</strong> under common agreements and glossing over points of contention.</td>
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<th>Good and Dangerous</th>
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| • **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
  - Inner Library
  - Narrative Habitus
  - Narrative Identifying
  - Subject Position

Teach people who they are

- How are stories situated among other stories?
  - Interpellation
  - Narrative conformity
  - Narrative induction

Connect people

- With whom do stories call upon the listener to identify?
  - Narrative conformity
  - Fabrication mechanism

Good and Dangerous

- How do stories maintain community?
  - Genre

- How do stories assemble a group of people?
  - Narrative inflation

- How do stories move the audience to action?
  - Boundaries

- How do stories illustrate 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.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>How do stories work?: <em>Fallen Democracy</em></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teach</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Socially engaged intellectual</td>
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<td>• Encourage intellectual audience to engage scientific training in civic responsibility.</td>
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<td><strong>Connect</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Fabricates a unified, apolitical group by keeping criminality ambiguous.</td>
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<td>• Construction of “illegal” immigrant is neglected, keeping the figure of the criminal separate from figure of the immigrant.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Good &amp; Danger</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>Apocalyptic</em> deflated to <em>romance</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>• <em>Apocalyptic</em>: State struggles between democracy (good) and tyranny (evil).</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <em>Romance</em>: Intellectuals cannot transform the government, but can intervene to empower immigrant families.</td>
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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.

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**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.
References


References (cont.)


Rodríguez, D.C.P. (2016). Stuck on this side: Symbolic dislocation of motherhood due to forced family separation in Mexican women deported to Tijuana. *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 23(1), 5-22. [https://doi.org/10.5840/pcw20162112](https://doi.org/10.5840/pcw20162112)


