

**“TELL ME A STORY:” A DOCUMENTARY FILM ANALYSIS OF
THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF STORYTELLING**

A THESIS

**Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Sociology
Colorado College**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts**

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Spring 2022**

On my honor
I have neither given nor received
unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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Spring 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest appreciation goes to the incredibly supportive faculty and staff of the Department of Sociology at Colorado College for teaching me the skills to take on this thesis project and instilling in me the curiosity and confidence to pursue a non-traditional thesis. Special thanks to my advisor, Professor Kathy Giuffre, for her unwavering support over the more than a year that went into conceptualizing and creating this project. This thesis owes what it has become to her invaluable feedback, thoughtful advice, and creative insights, as well as her remarkable ability to tell a story about any topic I could ever think of. I also want to thank Dylan Nelson, Kevin Beechwood, Skye Mahaffie, and the rest of the members of the Department of Film and Media Studies who helped make this film possible. Bergen Hoff and Daniel de Koning contributed invaluable cinematography work to this project, and Lincoln Grench wrote an original score that brought the film to life. Like any cultural work, this film was a collective effort, and I want to acknowledge all the people who generously provided advice or played a role in the creative process: Charlotte Blum, Sabrina Brewer, Elle Hagler, Bergen Hoff, Heather Horton, Alana Jackson, Brita Mackey, Jamilah Maronde, Mari McCarville, Casey Millhone, Trisha Mukherjee, Sarah Packard, Toni Pizza, Liza Roe, Randy Swift, Joan Swift, Laura Tomlinson, Grace Tumavicus, and Natalie Van Tol. And finally, thank you to all the participants in this project for sharing their stories and time, and for being willing to be vulnerable in front of a camera: Charlotte Blum, Will Burglechner, Arom Choi, Owen Cramer, Ariana De Los Reyes, Mike Edmonds, Kat Falacienski, Debbie Howell, Cayce Hughes, Bennie Lewis IV, L. Song Richardson, Mae Rohrbach, Lisa Marie Rollins, and Will Taylor. This project owes everything to your stories.

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the cultural sociology of narratives and stories, this documentary film analysis assesses the social impact of storytelling. The power dynamics, personal utility, subversive capacity, and psychological impacts of narratives and narrative structures is well documented. While it is through the consumption, creation, and recounting of stories that humans understand and make sense of the world, academic studies of narratives center primarily around analyses of the role of stories in society, while few reflexively explore the process of telling stories and conducting research about stories. In this study, I interviewed 14 Colorado College students, faculty, and staff, asking each of them to tell me a story in relation to ten emotionally neutral words. I filmed this process and edited it to create a 28-minute documentary film about the social impact of stories and storytelling. I found that the process of asking people to tell stories, and the human connection catalyzed by these interactions, was more salient than the substance of the stories themselves.

Keywords: narrative structure, narratives, stories, listening, documentary, film, cultural sociology, reflexive

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Literature Review	2
<i>Narratives in the Creation or Subversion of Hegemony</i>	2
<i>The Role of Narratives in Life</i>	5
<i>Frame, Genre, and Form</i>	7
<i>Personal Engagement with Stories</i>	8
<i>Studying and Telling Stories</i>	11
Methods	13
Data	15
Analysis	15
Conclusion	15
References	18
Appendix A	21
Appendix B	23

“Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice.”

– bell hooks, 1986

Most people have never been asked how they feel about basic, fundamental facts of their lives. For instance, no one has ever asked me to tell a story about being male. And because I haven't told anyone that story, I'm not sure how I feel about being a man. If asked, I would probably begin by discussing the privileges entailed with inhabiting a dominant gender identity: I am nearly half as likely as someone who does not identify as male to be a victim of sexual harassment or assault in my lifetime, for example (National Sexual Violence Research Center 2018). In light of that reality, perhaps I would conclude that I like being male. But if I were to stop and think further, I might reflect that those realities are predicated on living in a cisheteropatriarchal, sexist society, and that the privileges I enjoy come at a great cost not only to those who don't inhabit dominant gender identities, but also to those who do. Maybe I don't like being male after all. I still can't be sure, because until I started writing these words on this page, I had never been asked to tell anyone a story about my gender, or my race, or my class background—all of which are characteristics fundamental to how I exist in the world.

Stories have many functions: they influence people, facilitate human connection, and entertain. Stories can also be self-revelatory—the reflection prompted by my effort to tell a story about being male is an example. We consume stories when reading the newspaper, tell stories when conversing with friends, create new stories through daily life, and even post our “stories” on Instagram. Yet most people seldom stop to consider the individual and social impacts of

consuming, telling, and creating stories. When that impact is considered, it is typically in the context of the power of stories to galvanize support for an idea or movement, but rarely considers the impact of storytelling on the storytellers themselves.

Documentary films represent one form of storytelling that can drive social impact. Documentaries have played roles in galvanizing international environmental protest, in re-framing the stories of battered women to gain political support, and as a means to reduce stigma towards people with obesity (Li and Peñafiel 2019, Polletta 2009, Burmeister et al. 2017). While the impact of the end product of some documentaries is well established, the impact of the process of making a documentary film on the film's participants has been less thoroughly explored. Further, the production of documentary films and their academic study typically occurs in distinct spheres; in response, (Polletta 1998:439) has argued that sociologists should “*be telling stories as well as studying them,*” and by extension that documentary filmmakers should also not only tell stories, but also study them (emphasis in original).

In this thesis, I aim to both tell stories *and* study them through the form of documentary film. I filmed interviews with students, faculty, and staff at Colorado College telling stories about words that I presented them and considered the impact of engaging in these interviews on participants. I argue that providing a platform for people to share stories in a context that provides close, judgement-free listening catalyzes human connection in a disconnected world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Narratives in the Creation or Subversion of Hegemony

The foundational importance of narratives in society, and the language from which they are constituted, is well established. Drawing on the work of Hegel and Kant, Habermas (1983:199) demonstrates that a person can only “externalize” themselves by engaging in

“interpersonal relations through language;” in other words, the self is only defined in relation to others, and these distinctions can only come about through the use of language. While it is only through language and narratives that people can conceive of their personal identity and sense of self, narratives—and the objects that represent and convey them—are also a source of domination that serves to establish and reinforce the status quo.

While Marxist scholars have traditionally seen culture as secondary, or “superstructural,” to class, Hall and his followers did not see culture as secondary to class, but rather as constitutive of it (Seidman 2017:133). In seeing “popular culture, from dress to movies, art, and music” as the “center of social conflict,” Hall “argued that class domination is not sustained exclusively by economic wealth and political power” (Seidman 2017:135). Instead, he insisted that the bourgeoisie work to “make their own culture into the socially dominant culture in order to give legitimacy to their class rule,” thus demonstrating that culture is fundamental—not secondary—to instituting and perpetuating class-based power hierarchies, but also that the legitimacy of the ruling class’s power is predicated upon the broader public seeing the socially dominant culture as superior to other cultural forms (Seidman 2017:135). This conception of culture builds upon Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony,” which describes how “a subordinate class has... this ideology imposed on its otherwise different consciousness, which it must struggle to sustain or develop against ‘ruling-class ideology’” (Williams 1977:109). While the imposition of these dominant ideologies on a society can seem to be “natural” and thus come to be “taken-for-granted,” the hegemony of these ideologies is never total, but rather “at any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society” (Hall 1977:325; Williams 1977:113). Thus hegemony, while dominant, is never totalizing, and is more a “process” than it is a “system or structure” (Williams 1977:112).

Hegemony is further reinforced—and sometimes subverted—through the dissemination and consumption of information communicated through forms of media such as television. Hall (1973:2) describes how the encoding of messages by media companies and their subsequent decoding by audience members is a recursive process, as, once decoded, those messages are “translated into societal structures,” which then inform which types of messages are produced by media companies. When both the encoding and receiving entities operate under the same sets of understandings and assumptions, their codes are “symmetrical,” and thus the decoding audience members interpret messages in exactly the manner intended by media controlling elites (Hall 1973:4). However, when decoding audience members instead operate using an “oppositional code,” they can “perfectly... understand both the literal and connotative inflection given to an event, but... determine to decode the message in a globally contrary way” (Hall 1973:18). This occurs in scenarios such as when an encoding audience member views a television debate about the need to limit workers’ wages as a matter of national interest, but “‘reads’ every mention of ‘the national interest’ as ‘class interest,’” which can represent a “significant political moment” (Hall 1973:18). Thus media companies have enormous power to shape public discourses and thus hegemonic culture, but this power is contingent upon symmetrical encoding and decoding between media companies and audience members.

To subvert what Gramsci calls the moving “equilibrium” of hegemony, subcultures can “magically” appropriate everyday objects when they are “stolen” and imbued with “‘secret’ meanings” in order to resist the established order that ensures that those objects “guarantee the continued subordination” of subordinate groups (Gramsci 1971:9; Hebdige 1979:18). People or subcultures engage in this same process of subverting hegemony when they choose to use an “oppositional code” in decoding media connotations (Hall 1973:18). Thus culture and language

play foundational roles in both the creation of one's sense of self, and in the creation and subversion of hegemony.

The Role of Narratives in Life

Many social movements use language and signs to subvert the established hegemonic order, with varied levels of success. Clay (2006) demonstrates how Black youth engaged in the hip-hop subculture use hip-hop to organize for social change and create political consciousnesses amongst youth. While hip-hop has been powerful for Black youth, Clay also demonstrates how hip-hop culture has become “stolen” and “celebrated” by the broader non-Black culture, which represents a move by the hegemonic ideology to “neutralize, reduce, or incorporate” threats to hegemony (Hebdige 1979:18; Clay 2006:118; Williams 1977:114).

While life experiences can be used to inform the creation of an alternative ideology in resistance to that of the hegemonic class—such as the hip-hop subculture—stories disseminated by media outlets can also be used to interpret one's life experiences in a way that informs actions that reinforce or subvert hegemonic order. Polletta and Callahan (2017) investigate what leads Trump supporters to believe that white men in the United States are dispossessed. They assert that Trump supporters have not simply been “‘duped’ by Fox News” or other conservative news outlets, but rather that stories propagated by media outlets provide people with a theoretical lens through which to interpret their life experiences, which for many, leads them to subscribe to Trumpian narratives of white dispossession (Polletta and Callahan 2017:2). Just as stories can be foundational in how people interpret the structural significance of their life experiences, the structure through which narratives are told can also be pivotal in determining a person's criminal culpability. Polletta (2009) analyzes a documentary film about battered women convicted of murdering their abusive husbands and finds that the way in which the film employs the

conventionalized narrative structure of ‘rebirth’ rather than other story frames often used to portray the struggles of battered women such as the frames of ‘tragedy’ or ‘quest’ allows the women to be seen as both agents and as victims. The ways in which narratives are framed has consequences: largely as a result of the novel framing strategy that this documentary film employed, activists in Maryland successfully convinced the governor to commute the sentences of eight women “convicted of killing or attempting to kill their abusers” (Polletta 2009:1505).

The impacts of various types of narratives have also been extensively studied by psychologists. Green and Brock (2000:707) found that research participants who are deeply engaged in reading a story (operationalized by the participants not noticing peripheral activity in the room) were more likely to “alter their real-world beliefs in response to experiences in a story world.” Another experiment found that when participants were highly absorbed in reading a story, they were unlikely to catch false statements hidden in the text, suggesting that “mechanisms that allow for a critical evaluation of text information are partly neutralized” when participants are deeply engaged in stories (Appel and Richter 2007:128). Further, stories can shape the way people see the world over substantial time periods. While Appel and Richter (2007) found that this false information had substantial short-term persuasive effects, they showed that these persuasive effects also increased after a two-week delay. Similar to Habermas’ (1983) assertion that it is through language that people come to create and recognize themselves, Appel and Richter’s (2007) study supports the extension of Habermas’ claim to add that people also incorporate the stories that they ingest and produce into how they see themselves and the world. Similarly, while written narratives have been demonstrated to exert significant persuasive power—even if false—video exposure has also been shown to have lasting affective impacts. One study found that repeated prolonged exposure to “elevating” videos appeared to increase

prosocial motivation and “improve recipients’ conception of human beings” over the course of six weeks (Neubaum, Krämer, and Alt 2020:194). Though these studies demonstrate the short and long-term effects of consuming stories, they do not explore the psychological impacts of producing or recounting one’s own stories. Nonetheless, this research demonstrates that stories communicated through both print and video can mold both what people believe to be true in the world, as well as their affective interpretations of life events.

Frame, Genre, and Form

Stories can also be used to mobilize people for a cause, and different communication media and genres are suited to accomplishing different tasks. Activists frequently use frame alignment techniques to accomplish movement goals such as strengthening their movement or recruiting new members. Morrison and Isaac (2012:62) analyze the narratives portrayed in cartoons produced by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to show how IWW members used “visual frame amplification” to “personify and concretize abstract issues,” dramatize messages, and portray characters in a compact narrative form. Coley (2015) also demonstrates how novels about textile worker strikes use framing tools to convince readers of the legitimacy of the strikers’ demands. For instance, the issues championed by a movement may be unclear or difficult to understand for many readers. By using the tools of plot, characters, and morals—tools not typically employed in expository writing—“narratives can model changes in behaviors, values, and beliefs for potential movement participants who are initially resistant to acting in response to the social problems they identify” (Coley 2015:61). Both Morrison and Isaac (2012) and Coley (2015) demonstrate how frame alignment is accomplished with the aid of the narrative form, as narratives—whether novels or cartoons—can use tools not available to messages communicated through an expository form. This process of frame alignment must inherently use

some form of symbolic communication to facilitate alignment between social movement organizations and members, however, “the framing literature has been criticized for its inattention to the forms or genres through which frames are conveyed” (Coley 2015:60). Further, much of the literature on framing has been directed towards expository communication styles that are intended to simply convey facts to describe and explain information, whereas “narrative writing”—as well as other narrative forms such as cartoons—“allows authors to deploy literary devices such as plots, characters, and morals that not only describe and explain events but also evaluate different perspectives and ultimately motivate readers to action” (Coley 2015:60). Thus, in crafting stories intended to achieve social impact, the importance of intentionally selecting a genre and form amenable to the project’s goals is paramount.

Personal Engagement with Stories

On a personal level, stories are popular and saturated with confusion and controversy. Drawing on the work of Lyotard, Polletta et al. (2011:110) describes the theory held by some postmodernist scholars that “when the old master narratives of progress, faith, and rationality became suspect, stories—particular, local discursive forms that claimed only verisimilitude and never absolute truth—became all that people could trust.” Because stories are “symbolically aligned with common sense rather than science, stories seem engaging and concrete rather than abstract,” leading them to feel “democratic... rather than monopolized by elites,” because of the fact that everyone has their own story (Polletta et al. 2011:110). And while stories possess a remarkable power to facilitate communication and empathy across “chasms of difference,” it is also clear that “stories’ power is socially organized and unevenly distributed,” and that powerful elites harbor disproportionate power in determining the “hegemonic codes” that profoundly influence culture (Polletta et al. 2011:114, 111; Hall 1973:19). This reality of inequality in whose

stories are heard has led some in the nonprofit world to ask if “speaking for others” is “ever a valid practice,” which has led to significant controversy, as wholly refusing to speak for people less privileged than oneself would “significantly undercut the possibility of political effectivity” (Alcoff 1991:7, 17). While the issue of speaking for people other than oneself poses many ethical considerations, it might be first addressed by recognizing when a person of substantial privilege possesses “credibility excess,” or “inflated” epistemic status resulting from one’s personal identities (Davis 2016:485).

Another tool with the potential to disrupt the power imbalances inherent to telling another person’s or communities’ stories is a technique known as “speaking back,” which involves “a range of deliberate practices that... result in participants revisiting their own... productions, reflecting on their work, often changing their minds, and productively challenging and contradicting themselves” (Mitchell, De Lange and Moletsane 2017:49). In addition to disrupting power imbalances and promoting productive participant reflection, storytelling has other essential functions, as stories can “secure us, raise our consciousness, and expand the reality of our experiences,” thus serving “both a cognitive and emotional function” because “when people tell stories about themselves or about others, they feel better and strengthen their social self” (Berger and Quinney 2004:8, Csesznek 2021:52). Thus, if mitigated properly, the inequalities inherent to storytelling can be leveraged to empower those individuals and communities sharing their stories.

It is also important to consider the processes entailed with telling one’s stories. As Goffman (1959:208) argues, people interact with others through performances of themselves, as humans are constantly engaged in the practice of “impression management.” Because an ontologically ‘true’ or ‘genuine’ version of oneself does not exist, people constantly manipulate

the presentation of themselves in response to their social context. It follows that which stories people choose to tell, how people choose to tell those stories, and which information they elect to include or exclude is determined by one's audience, as power dynamics are inherent to any relationship between a storyteller and a story receiver (Polletta 2011:111). While storyteller-story receiver relationships inevitably entail power dynamics, these relations are not inherently unidirectional. While Alcoff (1997:7) recognizes that "speaking for others" can have problematic implications, Polletta et al. (2011:111) point out that "stories' power is socially organized and unevenly distributed," implying that a storyteller-story receiver relationship can also include dynamics of providing a space for a person telling a story to be listened to, which allows them access to a modality of power to which they may not have previously had access. In the practice of studying stories, then, it is critical to not only consider the content of stories being told, but to also examine the context in which they are told. Further, Goffman (1959:222) asserts that "individuals... relax the strict maintenance of front when they are with those they have known for a long time, and... tighten their front when among persons who are new to them," which has implications for interview-based research, as most research takes place between individuals who are not well acquainted. Aside from relationship length, Goffman neglects to theorize about the relational conditions that might facilitate a sense of familiarity that modulates the degree to which people engage in impression management. While Goffman (1959:217) does outline the ways in which people "discipline" themselves to convey the desired impression to their audiences, he fails to address the social forces that determine the various ways that different people carry out these performances. Scholars have demonstrated that, when made aware of the stereotypes associated with their demographic group, women (Spencer, Steele, and Quinn 1999) and African Americans (Steele and Aronson 1995) perform worse on tests designed to assess

skills in that stereotyped characteristic relative to their male or white counterparts. This concept of stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson 1995) highlights the reality that people's performance is mediated by their environment, their social identity and demographic characteristics, and the social identity characteristics of those around them. Additional research investigating how physical environment, social identity, and demographic characteristics inform people's performances—especially in the realm of storytelling—is warranted.

Studying and Telling Stories

Existing research demonstrates the diverse challenges and potentialities of narrative storytelling for subverting and reinforcing power hierarchies on a personal and structural level. The research outlined above documents the role of narratives in establishing hegemonic ideology and thus culture and class relations (Seidman 2017; Williams 1977; Hall 1973; Hebdige 1979); the ability of subcultures to subvert hegemonic ideology through signs such as clothing styles (Hebdige 1979); the power of various narrative structures to render stories intelligible or unintelligible (Polletta 2009); the psychological impact of consuming stories (Green and Brock 2000; Appel and Richter 2007; Neubaum, Krämer, and Alt 2020); the importance of accounting for the genre or structure through which a story is told (Coley 2015; Morrison and Isaac 2012); and the personal utility of stories and the power dynamics entailed in their telling (Polletta et al. 2011; Alcoff 1991; Davis 2016; Mitchell, De Lange and Moletsane 2017; Berger and Quinney 2004; Czesznek 2021). Nonetheless, these analyses communicate their findings on topics of narratives and media through the medium of expository academic writing. While this mode of academic communication can efficiently communicate tangible findings relevant to these topics of investigation, the nature of the impact of narratives is inherently intangible: not only is it difficult to quantitatively measure the impact of narratives on an individual or population, but

Polletta et al. (2011:123) argues that “the most effective stories are those that are not told explicitly but instead are simply alluded to, with the speaker treating the story as already known by the audience,” and Morrison and Isaac (2012:62) point out that the genre through which narratives are communicated is central “because it structures the message and generates genre-specific properties... peculiar to it.” As such, rather than adhere to the traditional form of expository academic writing, I aim to show the social impact of storytelling and video communication through a narrative documentary video. Indeed, Polletta (1998:439) asks whether sociologists should “be *telling* stories as well as studying them” (emphasis in original). This proposition is not novel, as scholars such as bell hooks have for decades used their personal stories and experiences to inform theoretical arguments (see, *inter alia*, hooks 1981, hooks 1986, hooks 1991). While the question over whether humans “impose narratives on an inchoate flux of reality” or “whether social relations are fundamentally narrative in structure” is a topic of debate among scholars, if the latter is the case, then perhaps “narrative can capture the determinants and consequences of social action better than non-narrative and static sociological concepts” (Polletta 1998:439). Through the form of documentary film, I explore the wide array of stories that different people associate with the same words, while also examining the the personal impact of storytelling on people and connections between people. By using this form not commonly used in academic studies, I aim to not only explore the impact of storytelling for study participants, but also to demonstrate the impact of storytelling through video to audience members—in short, I aim to both tell stories *and* study them, as Polletta (1998) suggests. Thus the public facing nature of this study allows audience members to vicariously engage in the same exercises as study participants, allowing them to explore their own stories as they watch other people’s stories through this project.

METHODS

I recruited 14 participants from Colorado College to participate in interviews. I used electronic communications including email and instant messaging to recruit a purposive convenience sample of participants who I either knew personally, or whose contact information was available in the Colorado College directory. I aimed to include an equal number of students, faculty, and staff in my sample, though this was difficult due to the high attrition rate of people who signed up for interviews, possibly owing to a surge in Covid-19 transmission rates around the time of filming. I selected participants in an effort to obtain a diverse sample in terms of age, gender, race, and sexual orientation. For staff members, I selected participants from a variety of roles, departments, and levels of authority at the college. Though participants were told that interviews would last between 30 and 45 minutes, I allowed an hour for each interview to ensure that participants did not feel time pressure in responding to questions.

Interviewees were asked to respond to several introductory questions and then to tell a brief story that comes to mind in relation to ten words: their name, game, dream, bicycle, moon, book, shoes, birthday, keys, and stories. When time allowed, they were also asked to respond to several concluding questions asking them to reflect on their experience (see Appendix A). To select the ten words used in this study, I compiled a list of 24 words that I judged to be emotionally neutral. Using these words, I conducted five pilot interviews with personal contacts and took notes on the stories that people told as well as their apparent emotional reactions to each word. In an effort to encourage participants to recount specific, visual stories, I ultimately chose to prioritize ten words that elicited visual imagery for participants. When possible, I also selected homonyms to facilitate participant's interpretations of the same words in different ways. At the end of each interview, I asked participants to write several words on a chalkboard for use

in film editing. Each participant completed a demographic survey after finishing their interview (see Appendix B).

In acknowledgment of the power dynamics inherent in telling and receiving stories, I aimed to mitigate the effects of the “credibility excess” that might arise as a result of the social identities I inhabit (Polletta 2011, Davis 2016:485). As a cisgender, white, male, young student interviewing people from a variety of social identities, the interplay between my identities and those of my interviewees undoubtedly informed the “front” that interviewees enacted (Goffman 1959:222). In an effort to make interviewees as comfortable as possible, I refrained from responding to participant’s stories about words until they had stopped speaking for several seconds, though I adopted a more conversational style in the beginning and end of each interview. In my responses to stories, I intentionally affirmed participants that the stories they told were interesting, engaging, and useful to my research. However, it is important to recognize that these efforts could never ameliorate the power dynamics intrinsic to this study.

I edited interviews into a 28-minute film, ensuring that I included at least one significant moment from each interviewee. Interview segments were selected and assembled to illustrate the ways in which storytelling in these interviews facilitated human connection by providing people with the space to share their experiences with a close listening conversational partner. I also included a segment explaining the thought process behind the project at the beginning of the film, which I framed in terms of a “mad scientist” conducting research on subjects. Throughout the film, and at the end, I included my reactions in the persona of a “mad scientist,” and concluded the film with footage juxtaposing social isolation with social connection. The final film screened at Colorado College.

DATA

Interviews ranged in length from 25 to 69 minutes, with a mean of 41 minutes. Out of the 14 participants, five were members of the student body, five were staff members, and four were professors (I aimed to interview five professors, but one was unexpectedly unable to attend the scheduled interview at the last minute). Eight participants identified as female or women, five identified as male or men, and one identified as queer. Six participants identified as white, two identified as Black, two identified as Asian, one identified as Black/Korean, one identified as Black/Filipina, one identified as Native American (Pawnee and Dakota), and one identified as mixed. The age distribution was as follows: six participants between the ages of 18 and 25, two participants between the ages of 26 and 35, one participant between the age of 36 and 45, two participants between the ages of 46 and 55, one participant between the age 56 and 65, one participant between the age of 66 and 75, and one participant over 75.

ANALYSIS

The film that is the end product of this study, *Tell Me a Story*, can be viewed online at: <https://vimeo.com/709171212> (password: story).

CONCLUSION

In this study, I set out to explore the demographic variables that inform the types of stories that people tell in relation to ten emotionally neutral words. While I found that people recounted a wide variety of stories and tended to be forthcoming in sharing those stories with me, I also found that asking people to share stories in relation to common words had the effect of making interviewees feel more comfortable being vulnerable with a stranger. The context of an interview facilitated human connection and vulnerability between interviewer and interviewee and was the focus of this film.

Though I reached out directly to many of the participants in this study to create a diverse sample, my sample was self-selecting, as only those participants who found an interview engagement appealing signed up for interviews. Future studies should explore the social effects of storytelling with a larger sample in order to better generalize these results. Additionally, though my findings highlight the connections formed between interviewers and interviewees across demographic variables through the process of interviewing, the identity of the interviewer was consistent throughout this study. Because this finding regarding human connection involves a bidirectional relationship, future studies should explore the effects that interviewers of varying demographics and interpersonal styles have on facilitating this effect. Finally, I conducted interviews in a studio with bright lights and cameras, and multiple participants commented on this peculiar setting. While my findings regarding human connection are likely to be robust because they occurred even in such an unusual social context, future research should explore how the setting of interviews modulates interviewer-interviewee dynamics.

From this project's conception, I felt uncertain when I told others about its premise. While I had spent time telling stories through digital media in the past, the stories I told had been less reflexive and were about something outside the storytelling medium itself. As I began to conceptualize this project, a story about stories, self-doubt crept in. I worried that people wouldn't want to share or wouldn't be able to think of stories about random words and wondered if asking people to tell stories about innocuous words would be worthy of a film. In the end, I barely used people's stories in my analysis, because that's not what I found most interesting. Paradoxically, what I ultimately found most salient was simply the act of doing what I was doing through this project: interviewing people and theorizing about the meaning of that that process, though it was the end product—the documentary film—about which I had felt so uncertain from

the beginning. As one of my interviewees, Mike Edmonds, expressed, “sometimes a story may be less interesting than others, but at the end of the day it’s still a story,” which implies that what matters is if, and how, one listens, rather than how interesting or engaging that listening material is. That was certainly true in this project, as it turned out that the stories I listened to were all sorts of things—funny, sad, joyful, vulnerable, engaging, and sometimes unengaging. When it came to editing, what I realized was that the substance of the stories wasn’t important. But what *was* important was the act of seeking out these stories and providing them with a place to be shared.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

I. Framing

1. *This is a study about storytelling in response to ten different words. I will say one word and ask you to tell me a story that comes to mind in relation to that word—the story can be something that happened in your life, something that happened in the life of someone you know, something you read about, really anything that comes to mind. There are ten words, and for each word I will give you about two minutes to respond, and will raise my hand at the end of two minutes as a signal for you to wrap up your story. It is totally fine if your story is less than two minutes long—if that’s the case, I might ask you some follow up questions. An example is the word “street.” If I said that word, then maybe you would tell me a story about a time when you were doing something on a street, or something like that. In response to each word, feel free to share as much or as little as want, and interpret the word in whatever way you like. You are totally free to stop this interview any time you want, and feel free to not answer a question if you don’t want to.*
2. *On a logistical note, when I ask you a question, please rephrase the question in your answer (as an example: if I ask what you had for breakfast, you might say something like “I had cereal for breakfast” rather than just “cereal”). I may also ask clarifying questions during your story, or interrupt to clarify something.*
3. *Do you have any questions before we begin?*
4. *First, can you introduce yourself?*

5. *Tell me the first story that comes to your mind. This could be a story you've told, that others have told you, that happened recently or a long time ago, etc. Whatever comes to mind.*

II. **Word Exercises**

If you can think of one, can you tell me a story about...

1. Your name
2. Game
3. Dream
4. Bicycle
5. Moon
6. Book
7. Shoes
8. Birthday
9. Keys
10. Stories

III. **Conclusion**

1. *What was this experience of telling these stories like for you?*
2. *How have you in your life used storytelling to convey things that are meaningful to you?*
3. *How has somebody else's storytelling impacted you? This could be someone else's story or stories that prompted you to make a change in your life or changed the way you look at the world, or impacted you in any other way.*
4. *Do you have anything else you would like to share from any of your stories or that I didn't touch on yet?*

IV. **Wrap Up**

1. *Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this project with me today and for sharing your stories. One of the things that has been powerful for me to see through this project has been to hear people's stories and to see how words that might seem unremarkable and unimportant connect to important things in our lives. I'm really grateful for your sharing with me today, and I know that some of these stories might have touched on powerful emotions for you. If that's been the case, I've compiled some information that might be helpful or interesting to you in this resources sheet (hand resources page to participant). Feel free to reach out to me at any time if you have any questions about anything we did today.*

APPENDIX B

Demographic Survey

First Name: _____

Last Name: _____

Race/Ethnicity: _____

Gender: _____

Age (please circle one):

18-25

26-35

36-45

46-55

56-65

66-75

75 or older