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Stories of North Omaha: Conveying Identities, Values, and Actions through Storytelling in a Public Meeting

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Abstract

This study uses discourse analysis from a Language and Social Interaction (LSI) perspective to analyze the personal stories that were told during the North Omaha Development Project (NODP) public meeting. Personal stories may not intuitively seem to be important in public meetings because they center on individual, personal experience, rather than discussing issues in public terms. However, stories help people to create and negotiate their identities, demonstrate their values, and indicate what actions ought to be taken to enact those values in meaningful ways. In the NODP public meeting, presenters and audience members told stories that demonstrated the important distinction between community members and outsiders, and offered competing notions of the community values and appropriate actions that should be taken to address neighborhood poverty. This analysis offers insights into how public participation scholars can view stories told in public meetings as well as practical implications for officials convening public meetings.

Keywords

discourse analysis, identity, narrative, public meeting, storytelling, values

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The purpose of this essay is to explore connections between Language and Social Interaction (LSI) approaches to scholarship and theories and practices of storytelling in public meetings. Specifically, in this essay I investigate how participants in the North Omaha Development Project (NODP) public meeting tell and respond to personal stories, and what those stories seem to do in the meeting. Personal stories may not initially seem to be appropriate in a public meeting setting because stories emphasize individual, personal experience, rather than public issues and problems. Indeed, foundational theories of public deliberation emphasize that good public discourse should be oriented toward the common good, not personal interests, and that decisions should be based on sound reasoning and analysis (e.g., Cohen, 1996).

Yet, contemporary models emphasize that public deliberation also includes social dimensions such as respect, consideration, and mutual comprehension (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; Gastil & Black, 2008). This emphasis provides the potential for viewing storytelling as part of deliberative discourse (to the extent that stories can function to facilitate deliberative social or analytic processes) and opens the door for LSI scholars to examine how stories are told in public contexts. A handful of political communication scholars advocate that discursive forms such as personal stories ought to be included in theoretical conceptualizations of public deliberation (cf., Black, 2008; Fraser, 1992; Sanders, 1997; Young, 1996) and some empirical work has examined storytelling in deliberative public meetings (Black, 2009; Polletta & Lee, 2006; Ryfe, 2006; Walsh, 2007).

This relatively recent, and modest, body of work has made some important contributions to our understanding of storytelling in public meetings. We know that people tend to tell personal stories during deliberative meetings (Ryfe, 2006) and that these stories help them provide support for their arguments (Black, 2009; Polletta & Lee, 2006), manage conflicts (Black, 2009; Ryfe, 2006; Walsh, 2007), grapple with public issues (Ryfe, 2006), and provide testimony about their own experiences relevant to the topic (Walsh, 2007).

The previous work on storytelling in public meetings draws on a variety of theoretical and methodological traditions and although some of it engages bodies of LSI work, for the most part the extant literature has not emphasized explicit connections to the LSI traditions. A more explicit treatment of stories as languaged social interaction would enable public participation scholars to see more nuanced discursive aspects of storytelling in public meetings. This essay

aims to connect the literature on storytelling in public meetings to the theoretical commitments and methodological tools offered by LSI approaches. Such an effort is useful for the field of public participation because it can help scholars and practitioners better understand what people are *doing* when they tell stories, the impact of different discursive choices made by storytellers, and the role stories play in public meetings.

This essay makes a modest contribution to the public participation literature by investigating storytelling in a public meeting context that is modeled on a public hearing, rather than a model of deliberative or dialogue practice, which has been the focus of previous work (e.g., Black, 2009; Ryfe, 2006; Polletta & Lee, 2006; Walsh, 2007). Although the public hearing model has been criticized by public participation scholars –rightfully so, I believe—it is nonetheless a common format for public meetings. Having a better understanding of how storytelling occurs and is responded to in the public commentary portion of public hearings is useful for public participation scholars and practitioners in its own right.

A second, and potentially more profound, contribution of the current study is that it offers a closer look at the discursive construction of meeting participants' identities, community values, and attitudes toward potential public action. Although these issues also arise in the previous investigations of storytelling in deliberative public meetings (e.g., Polletta & Lee, 2006; Ryfe, 2006; Walsh, 2007), the LSI approaches described below highlight how these phenomena – values, identities, and calls to public action—are inherently discursive. By interrogating these issues, the current study can contribute to further theorizing about public participation.

LSI's Contribution to the Study of Storytelling in Public Meetings

As described in the introductory essay to this special issue (see Leighter, Black, Cockett, & Jarmon, this issue), LSI scholars draw attention to the ways in which phenomena such as meaning and identity are constructed and performed in interaction. Thus, LSI analysts can gain an understanding of what is meaningful to a group of people by closely examining their everyday talk. Three predominant traditions –sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and cultural communication—have been influential in shaping how LSI scholars investigate storytelling. Each tradition offers a unique contribution that can further our understanding of how personal stories function during public meetings.

LSI Approaches to Analyzing Storytelling

Sociolinguistic approaches to storytelling focus on the structural features of the narrative form. The widely-recognized work by William Labov (1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967) has provided many scholars a foundation for identifying what counts as a story. Labov defines narrative as "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred" (1972, p. 225). Labov argues that narratives are made up of, at a minimum, a series of temporally ordered clauses that provide the orientation, complicating action, and resolution of the story. Fully formed narratives also include an abstract, which previews the story, evaluation statements, which provide the story's moral, and a coda, which signifies the story's end. This structural definition is evident in much of the work on storytelling in public meetings (e.g., Black, 2009; Ryfe, 2006; Polletta & Lee, 2006) and is often used as a starting point for identifying stories as a distinct discursive entity.

A second LSI approach used to study stories comes from Conversation Analysis, which focuses close attention to how language is used in everyday interaction (see Sacks, 1995; Schenkein, 1979). Rather than looking at structural features of narratives, conversation analysts pay attention to the interactive nature of storytelling (cf., Beach & Japp, 1983; Jefferson, 1979; Mandelbaum, 1987; Norrick, 2000; Polanyi, 1985; Tracy, 2002). Conversation analysts argue that the storytelling interactions not only shape what the story means but also the interactants' identities or roles. That is, the interaction involved in telling and responding to stories helps people construct their identities vis-à-vis one another, which is a point I return to below.

Conversation analysts also indicate that stories have discursive force in the conversations. These scholars look at what people *accomplish* through storytelling. If we apply this insight to the context of public meetings, it is reasonable to assume that people in these meetings tell personal stories for some purpose, and these stories help people do things in the meeting (e.g., support arguments, build consensus, show problems with an opposing side's presentation of the issues, etc.). Some previous work on storytelling in public meetings implicitly draws from conversation analytic methods (e.g., Black, 2009; Polletta & Lee, 2006), but the field would benefit from more explicit use of LSI methods to investigate the languaged interactions of storytelling.

The third LSI tradition that is relevant for understanding stories in public meeting comes from cultural communication (e.g., Carbaugh, 2005; Philipsen, 2002). Cultural communication scholars indicate the importance of storytelling as a performative event that displays cultural values and has the potential to reinforce or challenge cultural worldviews (Bauman, 1986; Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Briggs, 1996; Hannerz, 1969; Langiller, 1989; Philipsen, 1997).

The cultural communication approach also emphasizes the importance of context in shaping the meaning of the story. Stories told in one context draw on the cultural meanings of the participants and thus stories would not necessarily have the same meanings if they were told in a different time or place. When people choose to tell stories in a public meeting, cultural communication scholars would remind us, it is different from telling a story about the same events in a more private or personal setting. The public context guides the performance of storytelling and also influences the listeners' likely interpretations. Very little previous work on storytelling in public meetings has explicitly drawn on cultural communication scholarship (with my own work [Black, 2008, 2009] being somewhat of an exception) despite the recognition that values and context are important.

The current study draws on methods from these three LSI traditions to analyze stories told at the NODP public meeting. As LSI scholarship reviewed below shows us, personal stories can display values, help interaction partners construct and negotiate their identities, and provide culturally-situated meanings that can guide the group's future action. In the NODP public meeting, then, we can glimpse participants' values, identities, and meanings they associate with potential public actions by looking closely at their stories.

Storytelling, Identity, Values, and Action[2]

Stories help group members define their identities by giving content to their sense of self. The connection between storytelling and identity has been noted in a wide variety of communication domains (for a review see Ochs & Capps, 1996). Many scholars (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1983; Linde, 1993) maintain that identity is formed, understood, and expressed through narrative. Ochs and Capps (1996) argue narrative and self are "inseparable" because "personal narrative simultaneously is born out of experience and gives shape to

[2] Portions of this argument are spelled out in greater detail in my previous work: Black L. W. (2009). Storytelling, deliberation, and dialogic moments. *Communication Theory, 18*, 93-116.

experience. . . . We come to know ourselves as we use narrative to apprehend experiences and navigate relationships with others" (pp. 20-21). Thus, narrative and identity have a dialectical relationship in that people construct their senses of who they are through telling others about their experiences, yet their senses of identity shape which experiences they choose to narrate and how they go about narrating them in a given context.

Additionally, stories help group members define who is included and excluded from the group's shared identity (Black, 2008, 2009). When citizens in a public meeting tell their stories, they make choices about how they describe their experiences and how they describe their group affiliations. Stories told in a public setting can demonstrate how participants categorize themselves, and one another, which can provide insight into participants' underlying concerns about who should have the right to speak. For instance, if a storyteller portrays herself as "a longtime resident of this neighborhood" (giving her authority to speak about neighborhood concerns), it seems likely that she might critique an outsider's judgment about what is really important to the community.

Stories also manifest values and the cultural worldview of the storyteller (Hannerz, 1969; Philipsen, 1997; Smith, 1998). Value manifestation is very relevant in public participation settings because it is often difficult for participants to understand worldviews and value systems that are different from their own. Part of what makes stories powerful is that they are able to display values and worldviews that are typically not talked about explicitly. Thus, stories can provide listeners access to another person's values in a way that is qualitatively different from what group members would likely experience through other types of interaction.

Finally, stories can promote future action by drawing the listener into the storyworld and connecting the events in the story to the current state of the group and the foreseeable future. Bauman (1986) notes that an important feature of stories is that they are "doubly anchored in human events" by being "keyed both to the events in which they are told and to the events that they recount" (Bauman, 1986, p. 2; see also Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Briggs, 1996). This double anchoring can allow the listeners to take on something from the experience of the storyteller and make it their own.

As the story unfolds, participants in the storytelling event (in this case, the attendees of the NODP public meeting) may be able to see connections between the characters' struggles depicted in the story and the dilemmas faced by the current group. LSI scholars show that

specific discursive devices such as they storyteller's evaluative statements (Schiffrin, 1990) and metanarrative comments (Bauman, 1986) make these links evident to listeners. Events depicted in the story can guide the group's future action by allowing listeners to project the meanings drawn from story events onto their current experience and use these meanings from the story to predict what should occur in their community.

Stories of Crime, Youth, and Opportunity in North Omaha

In this section I present three excerpts from the NODP public meeting to explore what the stories told in this setting imply for issues of identity management, value manifestation, and group action for this community. The first two of these excerpts present complete narratives, one from a presenter and one from an audience member, which both center on the topic of crime in the neighborhood. I call these narratives "complete" because they include all the structural elements of a story according to Labov's (1972) model. To understand how the stories function discursively in this context I examine the identity labels used by the storyteller, the values that are evident in the story, and the actions that the storyteller seems to advocate through the personal narrative told.

Excerpt One: "As an outsider" story (14:00)

The first story is told by "Tony," who is one of the consultants involved in presenting information to the audience on how development of the area is likely to take place. During the question and answer session, an audience member submits a question "North Omaha is plagued by high crime. Can any new development in North Omaha really be sustained if the high crime rate isn't first addressed?" Bob Peters, the presenter who had been reading and responding to questions, looks at Tony and asks, "Tony, would you like to comment on that?" Below is Tony's response.

01 That's a good question. And I think there's, uh, as an outsider there's two
02 ways this town is being perceived, at least this area, and it's really difficult to
03 discern, um, what the actual reality is. But, there seems to be like a heavy
04 perception of that North Omaha is a very bad and violent place. I went today
05 to to to North High I went to talk to one of the teachers there, his name is, um,
06 Derek Davisdon. I asked him, you know, you, know what do you think about

07 the neighborhood, especially what do you think about the high school as a
08 place? And he said "it's a great high school." I mean, he came here from
09 Blair, Nebraska, um, he drives here every day just to teach here because he
10 thinks it's a great school, with great kids, and also, you know, also it's it's a
11 community. And so, you know, I think, I think, I think I struggle when I hear
12 that idea that North Omaha is a bad place, or any worse than anywhere else.
13 Um, I think it has its fair share of problems that need to be addressed, but I
14 don't think bad people live there. I don't think it's um, you know, holistically,
15 that it's a, it's a, it's a, it's a, you know, a a completely dangerous place. I
16 think it has its elements that need to be addressed, again, but I think the
17 perception, the image of the place, um, I think tend to mar the community
18 more than it really should.

Tony goes on during the rest of his speaking turn to blame the mass media news for giving excessive coverage to crime in North Omaha, while ignoring the good things that are happening in the neighborhood. He argues that the neighborhood needs an "image campaign" to repair people's misperceptions of the place as dangerous and crime-filled.

The primary identity distinction evident in this excerpt is that of insider/outsider. Tony begins his speaking turn by identifying himself as "an outsider." The identity of "outsider" anchors his perspective on the problem and gives him a particular view of the neighborhood. Presumably there is some value in the perspective of "an outsider" because it can provide a distanced, perhaps more objective, sense of what is going on in the neighborhood. However, Tony acknowledges that there are competing views of the identity or "image" (line 17) of the neighborhood that make it difficult for an "outsider" to "discern" the "actual reality" of North Omaha (lines 02- 03).

To address his concern, Tony seeks out an insider's perspective on the neighborhood. His story of the visit with a local schoolteacher ostensibly provides this insider's perspective. Tony presents the teacher's perspective of the neighborhood as a "great" place when he says "it's a great school, with great kids, and also, you know, also it's it's a community" (lines 10-11). In fact, the teacher thinks that the area is so "great" that he drives in from a neighboring town everyday "just to teach here" (line 09).

The high schoolteacher works in North Omaha, which may lead Tony to treat him as an insider in the neighborhood. However (as evidenced in several of the other essays in this special issue), the audience members express concern throughout this meeting that people involved in the planning do not live in the neighborhood and, their assumption seems to be, therefore cannot truly know what it is like there. The fact that the schoolteacher in Tony's story lives in a different town and merely drives into the neighborhood to work is not likely to lead audience members to accept this character as an insider. Thus, even though Tony seems to try to balance his perspective as an "outsider" with the knowledge of a local person, it seems likely that it will not be viewed this way by the audience.

Contextual aspects of the storytelling event also contribute to Tony's identity as an outsider. He is one of the consultants hired by the city council to address problems in the neighborhood, and he mentions in a previous speaking turn that he is from out of town. As a member of the consulting team he is granted some authority in the event. He stands in front of the audience, he wears more formal attire than most of the audience members, he holds the microphone, and he is given the speaking opportunity by another member of the consulting team. Thus, even though he is an "outsider," he is a particular type of outsider who holds a position of authority to speak of the neighborhood issues and promote solutions to neighborhood problems. These contextual features allow us to see that Tony's identity as outsider/consultant is provisionally deployed in response to the context of what came before in the interaction (Bob Peters asking him "Tony, would you like to comment on that?") and the contextual features of the meeting.

In addition to managing issues of identity, Tony's story also expresses some values. These values are not stated explicitly as such, but are evident in the way Tony talks about the problems faced by the neighborhood. Tony begins his speaking turn by noting that there are "two ways this town is being perceived." The first perception he presents is that North Omaha is a "very bad and violent" place (line 04). He rejects this perception as untrue and argues that the perceptions "mar[s] the community more than it should" (lines 17-18). The second perception is that North Omaha is a "community," which comes through in his story about his visit with the schoolteacher (lines 04-11). Although violent crime is viewed as bad, what really seems to be at issue for Tony is not how to alleviate crime, but instead how to address the "perception" of North Omaha as violent. He acquiesces that the neighborhood has "elements that need to be addressed"

(line 16), but insists that the problem is not any greater in North Omaha than anywhere else and that these "elements" exist in a context of a "great" community.

Tony's story also provides some guidance for future action that he believes ought to be taken by the group. His story serves to frame the problem as one of perception, rather than actual crime level. As the vast literature on framing (e.g. Entman, 1993) shows, any definition a problem always implies a particular kind of remedy. LSI scholars who investigate framing (Tannen, 1993; Putnam, 1990; Putnam & Holmer, 1992) argue that such framing occurs in subtle language choices and can be seen through discourse analysis.

In this case, Tony uses his story as a way to challenge indirectly the frame of reference that the original question posed, and instead frame the issue of crime not as a material problem that needs money or legal action to change, but a problem of "perception" or "image." This framing does two things. First, it allows Tony to disagree with the citizen who posed the question without seeming directly confrontational. Ryfe (2006) demonstrates that participants in deliberative meetings he studied often used stories to engage in conflict management indirectly, which allowed participants to manage their public "face" as well intentioned citizens. This might be the case for Tony as well. As an outsider/consultant, Tony would be well advised to attempt to establish trust or alignment with the community, rather than exhibit an adversarial approach to the meeting. By responding with a story, Tony can indirectly disagree with the original questions presumptions about crime and offer a new framing of the problem.

Second, the reframing Tony offers is one of perception and image, which can be addressed through changing the media coverage and engaging in a public relations campaign for the neighborhood. The actions implicated by his story are ones that members of the community can easily take: community members need to change their own and others' perceptions of the neighborhood as violent and dangerous.

In sum, the story Tony provides in his answer indicates a distinction between outsiders and insiders and positions him as an outsider. Moreover, Tony is a particular type of outsider (a consultant) who has something to offer to the community. As an outsider/consultant, Tony sees the primary problem related to crime being the perceptions that people hold of the neighborhood. So, the logical action to take is to change the perceptions through engaging in an image campaign for the neighborhood. From his perspective, this communicative action is clearly

something people in the neighborhood can do. Image repair is a goal that can be acted on and achieved, particularly, one might argue, with the skills and expertise of an outsider/consultant.

Excerpt Two: "Going back to the crime thing" Story (26:32)

This portion of the meeting was structured such that audience members submitted questions on index cards, which were then read and responded to by presenters. Because of this structure, the series of interactions that occurred directly after Tony's story were not a response to the content of his story or the argument he was making. However, several minutes later an audience member raised her hand and told her own story relevant to crime in the neighborhood, which disputes several of the issues raised by Tony.

The following excerpt presents two stories of personal experiences this audience member had with crime in the North Omaha neighborhood. The first story is fairly brief and is displayed in lines 01 through 03. The second story is evident in lines 08 through 14.

01 Well, going back to the crime thing, my brother had a job on 24th Street and
02 he lost his job, because they had to close down because they were being
03 robbed so much. And I see on the newspaper things like the, in the news,
04 things like the 'Mad Dads' and some lady was having some, uh, program to
05 help the area youth in here create music and stuff? I mean, I see that there's
06 positive influences here in North Omaha but I agree that there needs to be
07 done things to change the perception, but there also needs to be done things
08 to help keep our youths active so that they're not into this [unintelligible]. I
09 was, on my street when they, there were like 50 kids they were going to beat
10 up some kid, and I had my niece in the car. And I got on my cell phone to
11 call the police and she's saying 'don't call the police! Don't call the police!'
12 and she was trying to tell me, 'they're not really beating each other up, that's
13 for putting on the Internet' and then she said 'besides, it's not our job to take
14 care of this, it's the job of the police.' It's like, there's no citizenship
15 concepts among the youth to even call for crime stoppage.

The storyteller in this identifies herself and her family members as residents of the neighborhood. She talks about her brother and her niece, both of whom she describes as having experiences in the neighborhood. She describes specific locations in the neighborhood such as

"my street" (line 09) and refers to the young people in the area as "our youths" (line 08). These discursive choices emphasize her identity as a member of the community, someone who makes her home in North Omaha. As an insider to the community, she offers quite a different perspective from Tony and the schoolteacher character in Tony's story.

An important group of people she identifies in her stories are "youths." The storyteller does not identify herself as a youth, and despite referring to them as "our" youths in line 07, she characterizes them as people who hold beliefs and engage in activities that she disapproves of. In her second story (lines 08-14) the "kids" are engaging in violence. And, although there is no specific description in her first story of who is doing the robberies that forced her brother's workplace to close down, the evaluation she provides in line 08 (that things need to be done "to help keep our youths active so that they're not into this") implicates young people as the source of the problem.

The stories she tells deal explicitly with some values. Unlike Tony, who sees greatness in the community of North Omaha, this storyteller sees a problematically high level of violence in the neighborhood. The brief story about her brother demonstrates that crime in the neighborhood creates problems because businesses have to "close down" from being "robbed so much." Her second story explicitly describes "kids" engaging in violence toward one another and another young person, her niece, admonishing her not to call the police for help. The stories question whether young people in the neighborhood have values that the storyteller sees as important such as "citizenship concepts."

Although she acknowledges that "things" need to be done "to change perceptions" people hold of the neighborhood, she seems to disagree with Tony's assessment that perception is the root of the problem. Her story implies that the solution to the crime problems of North Omaha is not an image campaign. The source of the problem is a lack of appropriate values ("there's no citizenship concepts among the youth"), but the solution she proposes has some materiality. The action that needs to be taken is to create "things" that keep troublesome youths active so they are not "beating each other up" or robbing stores.

Excerpt Three: "I'm in college now" Story Fragment (48:30)

The last excerpt analyzed here is what I am calling a story fragment. There were several statements from audience members that are not structurally complete narratives, but still used the

teller's personal experience as a way to support their argumentative position told during the meeting. I am including one of these fragments here because it is responsive to the same topics addressed by the two stories presented above. Although it is not a structurally complete narrative, this fragment also presents issues of identity, values, and action that are relevant to the current discussion.

Near the end of the videotaped portion of this meeting, a young man near the back of the audience gains the floor. The first part of his statement is difficult to hear in the video, but includes the comment, "I believe that economic growth is very important to North Omaha, but also if we want to sustain that growth we need to invest in our young people like myself." Someone else in the audience shouts "give him the mike!" and one of the presenters brings the microphone back to him. He continues to address the audience, with microphone in hand, and provides a brief description of some of his personal experience. He states:

01 I mean, I'm happy everyone came, uh, showed up to support this
02 ordeal, but uh, you know the youth will help sustain the economic
03 growth and we really need to put, uh, the power back into the
04 community but the youth should be our main target. As an African, as
05 a young African American there are so many stereotypes out there, it
06 was hard for me to get where I am now. Like, I'm in college now and
07 the road was rough. I mean, I didn't have a lot of opportunity but I
08 think we should target the youth because economic growth is very
09 important.

In this speaking turn, the audience member clearly identifies himself with the youth of the community. He uses the phrase "young people like myself" and describes himself as "young." These descriptors place him in the category of "youth," whom the previous storyteller had criticized as violent and of questionable values. He also introduces race into the exchange about youth by identifying himself as "a young African American" and describing "stereotypes" that have made it "hard for me to get where I am now" (line 06).

Racial identity and racism were topics of discussion in many of the other interactions during the public meeting, which is evident in some of the other essays in this special issue. This speaker explicitly links racial identity with his identification as a "youth" and defines the problem facing the community as one that stems from "stereotypes" that make the road to

success "rough" by limiting "opportunity" available to people like himself. Despite these challenges, he has had some success, which is evident in his statement "I'm in college now."

The young man also identifies himself as part of "us" and says that "we really need to put the power back into the community" (lines 03-04) and "we should target the youth" (line 08). So, although he is a "youth," he is also a member of the group of people who are engaged in the public meeting. This dual identity as both a "youth" and a member of "we" the public meeting participants gives this speaker a perspective that is different from either the "outsider" (Tony) or the concerned adult community member (such as the woman in the audience whose stories are presented above). As such, he is able to speak on behalf of the youth and also to speak to the other participants of the public meeting as one of "us."

The story of this young man's success displays a few key values. Before being given the microphone, he explicitly states that he thinks "economic growth is very important" and that this growth should be sustained. He stresses the value in sustained economic growth and the opportunities it provides for young people to be successful. He also seems to value equality and fairness: his criticism of racial "stereotypes" is that they prevented him from having access to opportunities he should have had. Finally, he demonstrates some hope for the future of the neighborhood and the power of the youth. His comments that "we need to put power back in the community" by "investing" in the youth (lines 03-04) indicates that he places value in the community and believes the youth are important in shaping the future of that community.

These values underscore the importance he gives to the community taking action that "targets" the youth. Like the other audience member, this young man emphasizes that things can be done to provide opportunity for young people in North Omaha. While the first audience member finds this solution necessary to keep youth active so that they don't cause trouble, this young man argues that targeting interventions to the youth is helpful because it could provide opportunities to young people who would otherwise be stifled by stereotypes. Although his story seems to indicate that racial stereotypes are the source of the problem, the action that this young man advocates is not to directly deal with stereotypes but to provide young African Americans with opportunities to succeed despite the obstacles presented by racism. His story does not advocate for any particular solution or describe specific actions that the community should take to target the youth, but it seems to indicate that active measures could be taken.

Conclusion and Implications

This essay has examined some of the stories told by participants in the NODP public meeting with the goal of understanding how these stories function discursively in this setting. I offer a few observations here to spark conversation about the role of stories in public meetings and the ways in which analysts can access the meanings constructed and contested through stories.

First, from this analysis, it seems that the identity-construction aspect of stories can function to reify or challenge authority structures in meetings by privileging certain voices and kinds of experiences. In this meeting, there was a tension between "outsiders" and people who lived in the North Omaha neighborhood. The outsiders (including some NODP members such as consultants and some city council members) had expertise in the public sphere, but lacked personal experience with the community. The use of personal stories, then, potentially challenged the authority of outsiders by changing the focus from general public talk to personal experiences of struggle, hardship, and success in the neighborhood. By identifying themselves as members of the local community, both of the audience members had authority to speak on issues of importance by sharing their own experiences. In contrast, Tony needed to draw on other people's experiences (e.g., the schoolteacher) to provide story content that was relevant to neighborhood concerns. In this way, the identity construction aspect of stories challenged the outsiders' ability to speak competently about the community issues.

Personal stories also make value claims evident during the conversation. Although explicit conversation about values is perhaps uncommon in most public meetings, the evaluative aspects of stories can display community values and show where these are in conflict with values of other groups. In the stories examined here, we can see glimpses of conflicting ideas about what values are present in the community and how these values ought to inform future action. Storytellers in the public meeting use their stories to make argumentative points about the nature of the problem faced by the community and what actions the group ought to take to alleviate the problems.

Storytellers can be persuasive by drawing on shared values to link their personal experiences to more general claims about what the group should do. The young man did this in his story fragment by describing his success despite the "rough" road created by the "stereotypes" he faced as a "young African American." The values of equality and community were evident in his story discourse, which could make it possible for him to use these values when making

recommendations for future group action. If storytellers can promote values that are shared by other community members, it seems likely that their stories will be met with acceptance. In this way personal stories can be a powerful discursive resource that community members can draw on to promote their arguments and build common identification with listeners.

In this public meeting, stories were typically not responded to by other audience members. The public hearing format structured these interactions as a question and answer session, so the speakers who led the meeting seemed obligated to respond to audience members' comments. The videotaping of the meeting does not clearly show how the leaders of the meeting responded to the stories told, which is unfortunate. In general, though, the stories do not seem to be framed as questions, and it seems likely to me that they were treated by the meeting leaders as somewhat tangential to the goal of the question and answer session. This is a guess, based on what evidence was available in the video recording of the meeting. If this is true, though, I find it quite troubling.

Although stories provide personal examples, rather than information-seeking questions or explicit arguments to address public issues, the stories can further democratic discourse by helping identify the key identity groups, community values, and proposed community actions. If a goal of public participation is to encourage citizen participation in clarifying key values and solving community problems, then scholars and public meeting leaders ought to pay attention to participants' stories. The stories told in this meeting clearly showed that the community members who told stories (and, I would argue, many other audience members) were highly concerned with problems of violent crime and racism in their neighborhood. They wanted substantive, material solutions that would provide positive opportunities for the youth and improve the economic situation and quality of life in their neighborhood.

Implications for Practice

This study offers two practical implications for future public meetings. The first is simply that *conveners of public meetings ought to thoughtfully listen to, consider, and respond to citizens' stories*. Because stories convey community members' values and perceptions of potential public action, they should not be seen as just a distraction from public decision making or anecdotal evidence for a particular position. In this meeting community members' stories were relegated to a tightly-controlled Q&A session and were not fully responded to by public officials.

This is a missed opportunity because ignoring or trivializing citizens' lived experiences can contribute to their feelings that their voices are not heard or taken seriously in public meetings. One straightforward implication of this study is that it is worthwhile to help public officials become more sensitive to the values and identity categories evident in stories rather than reacting to stories as the subjective personal account of one individual's experience. Conveners of public meetings ought to be able to look deeper at the meaning of stories and see them as one important way that citizens engage in public problem solving.

A second implication of this work calls into question the legitimacy of the public hearing model. Ryfe (2006) tells us that storytelling is common in deliberative groups, which is consistent with findings from research in group communication more generally (see Frey, 1999). Moreover, Ryfe argues that 'weaker' facilitation styles provide more opportunity for storytelling interactions to unfold than facilitation styles that more tightly control speaking turns and appropriate responses. The study presented in this paper builds on Ryfe's insights, and implies that *re-structuring public meetings to involve deliberation (rather than "public comment") is beneficial for storytelling*. Deliberative forums' focus on group interaction that follow norms of equality and respect (Gastil & Black, 2008) can allow for more storytelling to occur. Deliberation can also give meeting participants the opportunity to work collaboratively through aspects of the public problem that are implied by their value commitments, identities as community members, and advocated actions. For these reasons, the current study contributes to the wide body of work advocating for more deliberative approaches to public participation.

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