Articles

Telling a Family Culture: Storytelling, Family Identity, and Cultural Membership

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Abstract

This study examines the role of public performance of private family identity through family storytelling. Using Narrative Performance Theory (Langellier & Peterson, 2006a), stories told as part of The Library of Congress's StoryCorps project were analyzed for how families publicly told private family stories to identify themselves as a particular family as well as a culturally appropriate family in the modern United States. Five themes of cultural identity in family stories were identified. The study found that families largely focused on positive stories that portrayed the family as pro-social and happy. Negative stories focused on how the family overcame their adversities as a group. Laughter was used to minimize face-threatening stories. The construction of the group identity was framed in such a way as to connect the family group to a larger culture that values independence, self-reliance, and cohesion as a family group. The study concludes by arguing that more work should be done to understand how public and private communication in families shape our understanding of what it means to be a family.

Baxter and Braithwaite (2006) defined families as groups "of two or more persons, characterized by ongoing interdependence with long-term commitments that stem from blood, law, or affection" (p. 3). While this definition is inclusive of what constitutes family, the question remains concerning what family *identity* is and how it is established and maintained. Once a social group is defined as family, how does it come to understand itself as a *particular kind* of family? This study examines how communicative practices constitute family identity through family storytelling in the public context of StoryCorps.

Literature Review

"Family" is given prominent status in American culture. "Family values" are touted by politicians and religious leaders. There are those who say "the family" is in decline or suffering under the weight of modern pressures (e.g., Bengtson, 2001). Even in an individualistic culture such as American culture (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Weiss, 1969), the family group holds dominant status in everyday life. However, dominance comes not from the preservation of the traditional nuclear family or from any broad consensus or definition of the family unit. Instead, people define for themselves what "family" means and who is included in their family group (Bengtson, 2001).

Family Discourse, Family Identity

Galvin (2006) argued that families are discourse dependent, meaning family identity is based on communication within the family as well as with others outside the family. Families construct and manage their identity as a family through everyday communication with each other, but always with an awareness of the potential for public evaluation. Galvin (2006) focused on less traditional family types, including stepfamilies and adoptive families. She argued that these families are *more* discourse dependent than traditional family groups, but all kinds of families may be understood as discourse-dependent. Even traditional nuclear family groups also are dependent on discourse to shape their identity both *internally* within the family group and *externally* to present themselves to a public audience.

Gergen (2000) argued that identity is purely social and therefore researchers should focus on the discourses available in the culture and how those discourses are used. Bellah et al. (1985) argued that Americans' sense of individualism and autonomy are constructed and maintained through social discourses and interpersonal communication, including the family. While many of their interviewees described themselves as independent people who construct their own identity, they also pointed to the importance of family in giving them a sense of identity and purpose. Mokros (2003) further posited that identity is not something that belongs to an individual person but is managed collectively through ongoing interaction of group members.

While Bellah et al. (1985), Gergen (2000), and Mokros (2003) were referring to individual identity construction, family group identity is similarly constituted through communication among family members as well as with a larger public audience. Many family communication scholars have made the move toward a constitutive approach to understanding how families understand themselves internally (e.g., Bylund, 2003; Galvin, 2006; Langellier & Peterson, 2004). This step takes identity to the group level, allowing a different way of examining family identity as socially constructed. For example, Blum-Kulka (1997) examined dinner-table talk in American Jewish, Israeli, and American Israeli families. She found that communication patterns by parents and children socialized the children in proper behavior within the particular (internal) family as well as the family role of children and adults within cultural (external) contexts. Langellier and Peterson (2004) showed how family narratives preserve ethnic, relational, and social history of the family and its members. The stories were means of understanding and constructing identities as families and members of a larger immigrant community.

These studies suggest that family identity is not static or permanent, but something that evolves as family members jointly adapt and construct their stories of the group as a whole as well as individual members of the group. Furthermore, these studies suggest that family identity is more than a simple internal relational process; it is also an external process wherein family members construct their identity within the context of cultural expectations for what makes them a family that belongs in the culture in which it exists. Therefore, family identity is the ongoing interactive, communicative process of creating and maintaining a collective, shared sense of the meaning of who the group is through membership in cultural groups (Langellier & Peterson, 2006a). While multiple forms of communication play a role in this, family storytelling is a particularly powerful way to denote family identity in everyday talk (Langellier, 2002).

Storytelling as Constitutive of Family Identity

One common distinction made between storytelling and other forms of communication is the significance of meaning making in the process of telling (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004). Stories about individual or group experiences focus on examining experiences and have significant implications for the ongoing shaping of identity of those who tell and those who listen. Bauman (1977) suggested that storytelling is a kind of performance, and that performance

represents a "frame" (p. 9), or a context in which narratives should be understood by the audience. The performative frame distinguishes narrative from non-narrative talk through verbal cues, such as opening words (e.g., "So…" or "One time…").

Langellier and Peterson (2004) outlined four elements of narratives: (a) they embody events; (b) they are situated in material conditions, history, culture, and time; (c) they follow discursive rules or guidelines specific to the speech community (e.g., who tells and who listens); and (d) they are legitimized and evaluated for how well they follow norms and beliefs of the intended audience. These elements highlight that narrative is a unique form of communication that gives families opportunities to construct their collective history and identity through telling events and experiences about the family.

Families tell stories that reflect who they are as a family by understanding cultural norms for what kinds of family are acceptable. As a result, family storytelling is a process of public performance as well as private talk. Family members must negotiate the private, internal and public, external performance of family storytelling in order to present itself as a kind of family that meets the criteria for acceptability (Galvin, 2006). Thus, the discourse-dependent, constitutive family must be seen as both a private and a public group.

Theoretical Framework

Narrative Performance Theory was developed by two family communication scholars (Langellier & Peterson, 2006a) who have been studying the functions of family narratives within the communication studies field for more than 20 years. Narrative Performance Theory allows for a complex and detailed analysis of storytelling in groups. The theory takes a constitutive approach to family identity by arguing that storytelling within the family is an important means through which families share meaning about themselves. Langellier and Peterson (2006a) outlined three interrelated levels of storytelling that work together to create meaning for the storyteller and audience. The first two levels are content- and task-level ordering, which outline the content themes of stories and the nature of tellability and family roles, respectively. The third and final level of narrative performance is *group-level ordering*, which is the focus of this study.

Langellier and Peterson (2006a) defined group-level ordering as the convergence of task-level and content-level grouping, but additionally as the ways in which family members ultimately come to understand themselves as a group with a particular group identity. At this level, cultural discourses enable and constrain how the family is able to identify itself as a group. Family stories are told by particular bodies, in particular settings, both of which allow certain stories to be told to particular people. Cultural norms and expectations influence and enable the possibilities of storytelling within the family through families' desire to be seen as appropriate members of cultural groups. Therefore, family identity emerges and is maintained in the family with reference to cultural membership and public performance.

Within the current project, family stories were told by particular bodies (family members), in a particular setting (a StoryCorps recording booth) to tell particular stories to the present family member or members, to absent family members (including present and future generations), and to a larger, public audience. In the process of telling stories as part of the StoryCorps project, the family storytellers and audience member(s) identified themselves both as a private, unique family and a family that is part of a larger cultural group. They are not only a family, they are also a family that belongs to a cultural framework. Using the group-level ordering concept within Narrative

Performance Theory, this study highlights how families manage private and public aspects of their identity in their storytelling, which leads to the study's research question:

RQ: How are group identity memberships accomplished in family stories?

Method

This study focused on family stories told as part of a large national project called StoryCorps, conducted in cooperation with the American Folklife Center at the U.S. Library of Congress. StoryCorps's aim is to gather the oral histories and stories of everyday Americans (Isay, 2007). The result is a collection of interviews and stories told between friends, acquaintances, and family members since 2003. The interviews are recorded in StoryCorp's main recording booth in New York City or in one of their mobile recording booths that travel the country. Anyone can apply to spend one hour in the recording booth with someone important in their lives and talk about whatever they choose.

StoryCorps provides a unique opportunity to understand how families constitute themselves through family storytelling for a public audience. Interviews were gathered over six weeks at the Library of Congress, where all the StoryCorps interviews are stored. A random selection of family-based interviews were chosen from the more than 7,000 total interviews in the archives by searching the Library's complete database of interviews. Using the keywords and family relationship descriptors in the database, more than 2,000 interviews between various family members were found, then numbered. To choose a random collection of stories, a list randomizer (http://www.random.org) was used. Transcription started with the first randomly chosen interview and then down the list. In qualitative research, there is not a set number of interviews or storytelling episodes that is necessary to validate the study's findings. Instead, researchers must constantly evaluate texts as data gathering progresses. Saturation is the point at which no additional themes are being added through additional data (Corbin & Strauss, 1994; Taylor & Bogdon, 1998).

Once the interviews were chosen, the first example of a family story was transcribed, based on Langellier & Peterson's (2004) four elements of storytelling set out above. Relevant stories were those that focused specifically on the experiences of the family as a group or sub-group. Stories that focused on one person's experiences rather than a group of family members were not included. In total, 119 stories were collected.

Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that qualitative research often is poorly designed and described in reports, so they laid out a six-phase process based on common qualitative research techniques that allows for a more rigorous and systematically conducted thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) said they developed the six phases based on more general qualitative analysis, so the fit was deemed appropriate to provide a rigorous analytic procedure to ensure a thorough and replicable research study. The first phase is "familiarizing yourself with the data" (p. 87). At this stage, the researcher read the data several times to become familiar with the dataset and writing down preliminary thoughts on common ideas about culture that appeared in the stories. The second step is "generating initial codes" (p. 88). During this phase, the researcher organized her notes and highlighted all references to cultural norms as outlined in research on American cultural identities (elaborated in the results section), as well as for what had emerged as content-level themes as part of another study in a larger research project on this data.

The third step is "searching for themes" (p. 89), which involved using constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965) to organize the codes into common categories about cultural identity and family. Once the themes were organized, the fourth step was "reviewing themes" (p. 91), which involved putting the codes in each theme back into the context of the entire story to ensure contextual relevance and accuracy. This is the point at which a fellow researcher and colleague was asked to review the codes and themes. The colleague was familiarized with the project and Braun and Clarke's process, then asked to review starting with the codes and conducting the analysis independently. When there were differences in perspectives on the themes, the two researchers collaborated and discussed their perspectives to understand and reconfigure the themes. Upon consensus across the dataset, the researcher moved to steps five and six, "defining and naming themes" (p. 92), and (f) "producing the report" (p. 93).

Results

There were a total of 372 messages (codes) of cultural family identity in the collection of stories, each of which used cultural values and references to tie to the family's sense of itself. The following results section highlights how those messages were classified into five broader themes of family group and cultural identity memberships through family storytelling.

Families Persevere

The first theme focused on families' ability to overcome obstacles and challenges within the family (n = 105). Families negotiated telling stories about imperfections in the family group while presenting themselves in a positive light to themselves and to a broader public audience. Families managed these face threats through framing the story in a culturally sanctioned "self-help" format and through laughter and humor to minimize the risk of being seen in a negative light.

The importance of self-reliance in American culture has been well established in the form of both praise and critique for its impact on everyday life. Self-reliance is embedded in the origins of American culture, in the folklore of the American Frontier (Stoeltje, 1987), and in social and political rhetoric (e.g., Zinn, 1980). Families told stories that reflected their ability to work together to overcome obstacles and support one another in times of crisis. Jesse Olsen told his grandson the story of how his father's family helped his father after losing both parents. His father, Ben, was given a job at his brother's company until he could finish high school. Eventually Ben opened his own business and became a financial success, and Jesse's family named their vacation property after Ben and his wife to honor this success. The role of the family in supporting Ben ended with Ben making something of himself and supporting a family of his own. The rags-to-riches theme is a common canonical story that highlight's the cultural notion that anyone who possesses determination can succeed (e.g., Hsu, 1975).

Humor is associated with joking and play, and less often with more serious purposes, such as coping with trauma, resolving conflict, and minimizing face threats (Boskin, 1997; Jenkins, 1994; Lynch, 2002). Storytellers used humor for both purposes. By using laughter and humor, painful moments in the family and experiences that threatened the positive image of the family as a group were minimized and the family identity was able to remain positive within the group and to the public audience. Rebeccah Beckman's story of her abusive stepfather, who accused his two stepdaughters of being promiscuous, was told with humor that dismissed the legitimacy of the insults. She told her daughter, "We still joke about it. Boy we should have done all that stuff he accused us of." Rebeccah and her sister, at the time of the abuse and later in telling the story to Rebeccah's daughter, were able to preserve

their personal and family identity by dismissing their stepfather's insults. In the end, humor overcame the negative threat to the family's presentation of itself.

These stories of struggle and adversity were told so that self-pity or scorn could be managed without damaging the family's sense of itself. Resiliency is valued in American culture, and telling family stories of negative experiences must take into consideration what will be seen as a good or relevant story that preserves this cultural expectation. Further, these stories were told about past events, not current ones. This may have been because past events were more easily concluded in a positive light than current events that were not yet resolved.

Each Family Is an Island

In the second theme, storytellers defined the family as a private, internally connected group (*n* = 81). Families were described as close-knit groups of people who engaged in family-exclusive rituals, enjoyed playful interactions and teasing as a group, and valued extended family connections as well as the nuclear family connections. When describing close relationships beyond the nuclear family, storytellers described distinctions between nuclear and extended family in a way that privileged the nuclear family beyond others, but not by dismissing extended family entirely. This preference is consistent with larger cultural biases toward the nuclear family as the preferred model of the American family (e.g., Ford, 1994; Rigg & Pryor, 2007; Schneider, 1980).

One way that families performed internal group identity was through distinctions drawn between the nuclear family and extended and stepfamilies. Even while describing the power and closeness of extended and stepfamilies, storytellers did so through comparing to the preferred nuclear family in ways that privileged the traditional family. Extended family was described as "like" a nuclear family, such as when Andrew Hendricks described his mother and her cousin, Monica White, as "like sisters" and Monica's statement that she has "no family" except her son, so her extended family has been particularly important. Similarly, Jeri Esther described her close extended family as being made up of "families," suggesting that the extended family is made up of nuclear families instead of nuclear families being a division of the larger extended family. These examples highlighted that the family group is identified as a group using cultural understandings that privilege certain kinds of families over others.

The second way this theme emerged is the emphasis placed on uniqueness. The families focused on their connection from within, based on an understanding of independence and uniqueness that is reminiscent of cultural uniqueness and independence of the individual in modern American culture (e.g., Gergen, 2000; Ochs & Capps, 1996). Family storytellers described family as a unique group that was separated from the world, but not isolated from it. For example, Alice Johnson, 55, described her extended family by saying, "We didn't even need other people because everyone was just right there." Non-family members were outsiders, not needed to be happy as a family. James Clinton, 59, described his childhood family life to his brother, Steve Clinton, 55, as "a sort of sanctuary away from the world." Again, family groups were set apart from the rest of the world for its very connectedness and supportiveness from within. In these instances, the public is not irrelevant to their lives as a family group, but the uniqueness and separateness of the family group remained worthy of note and was talked of universally as a positive aspect of being part of a family.

Families Cross Space and Time

This third theme (*n* = 73) focused on stories about how ancestors built family identity and affected the family group for the better. Idealized family members and intergenerational connections were the two predominant means of accomplishing family identity in this theme. Stereotypes of elders include veneration and frustration. While older

people sometimes are seen as wise and honored, they simultaneously are seen as exasperating and boring (Barker, Giles, & Harwood, 2004; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Thus, the idealization of elders is one part of a complicated relationship between young and old. Family identity is enhanced by the membership of particular family members who live up to idealized cultural notions of elders, while the presence of negative stereotypes were diminished.

Consistent with earlier findings by Martin, Hagestad, and Diedrick (1988), fathers and grandfathers were the most commonly honored ancestors, while mothers and grandmothers were rarely mentioned specifically. In honoring male ancestors, the importance of gender in maintaining family group identity emerged. While women may be expected to be caregivers and to provide support for the family, men were honored for doing the same or similar. Men were idealized fathers for reading bedtime stories and keeping children entertained, but mothers never were. Additionally, male relatives were honored for their skills as providers and role models. When women were honored, it was often alongside their husbands as collectively idealized parents.

Some research has shown that young people report less satisfaction in their communication with older family members than with older non-family (e.g., Cryer-Downs, 1989); however, other research has suggested that there is a great deal of satisfaction between young and old within the family (e.g., Anderson, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005; Harwood, McKee, & Lin, 2000). Williams & Nussbaum (2001) reported that both generations viewed their interactions as vital to passing down family information, placing high value on interactions across generations. The analyzed stories in this project demonstrated the more positive view of family interaction between older and younger family members. The task of telling ancestor stories was shared across generations. While the elder generation did a majority of storytelling about honored ancestors, they did so as a former younger generation, while today's younger generation often came to the recording booth as a way of honoring their elder.

Additionally, in managing the task of honoring elders, family members perpetuated the connection of family as a multi-generational unit. A majority of stories crossed generational lines, and many focused on stories that preceded the younger generation's birth. The family group, then, was extended beyond the current generations, building a long-term family identity. Implied in this, and through the acknowledgments occasionally made by storytellers, future generations of family were included in group identity as well. In telling about the idealized past, the present family began the process of idealizing the current generations for future family members.

Group ordering in this theme was based on the preservation of the group through highlighting who the family and its members were, establishing who the family is now, and building hope for who the family will be in the future. Honoring relatives as part of family identification and meaning making occurred at the level of the younger generation honoring the elder in their narratives, and the elder honoring her/his elders through stories. In telling, then, the families built their group identity simultaneously as an ideal family group and an ideal American family.

Families Follow Culture's Rules (or Don't)

The fourth theme (*n* = 68) is the opposite of the second theme. While families highlight themselves as an isolated and unique group apart from the rest of the world, they also (and sometimes simultaneously), self-identified as members of various kinds of cultural groups. This theme highlights how world events (e.g., the Depression and wars), religion, and race and ethnicity factor into family identification.

First, families described connections to the world that impacted the family. One way this happened in the stories was to evoke the larger public events that shaped the family and its members. Rob Ibsen's story about how the

Great Depression impacted his father's parenting and emotional distance highlighted this notion of how the family changed because of broader social economic struggles. In this story, the Depression was marked as part of the reason Rob's father was not close to his sons. While the Depression itself did not cause the distant relationship between a father and his children, the impact of the Depression on the family was provided as a reason for a less than ideal relationship. Invoking the Depression may provide a level of understanding and acceptance by the audience, including Rob's family and a public audience.

In other stories, world events and cultural identities were invoked to build family identity as part of a larger culture, particularly through major social events and crises. Glassberg (2001) argued that stories about family connection to world events are a means for individuals and family groups to connect to broader history and a sense of belonging both to a larger historical group and to a particular place. This need for connection, Glassberg argued, is driven by a desire to fill in the gaps of family history and to connect generations across long periods of time. For example, World War II was a common basis for family stories. In these stories, the cultural upheaval of war became a family drama, tying family identity to cultural membership through participation in war events. Rose Meyer, 89, told her grandson about the loss of her German Jewish family. She and her uncle managed to bring her parents to the United States before they could be sent to concentration camps. She came to the United States first, and immediately told her uncle that they had to start the process of bringing her parents over. Rose said:

> My uncle had connections with a wealthy senator who was sort of related and he vouched, he gave the affidavit…My parents were the last ones he gave the affidavit to…Because the rest of the family all perished. They were all killed.

The dramatic story of her parents coming over at the last possible moment, and her uncle's and her own hard work in bringing them over, told about their own dedication to one another as a family, and their strength in difficult times. It also invoked their identity as Jewish at a time of great persecution and social upheaval.

Ethnic group identity also was marked by stories of immigration, multiculturalism, and religion. These stories also explained family behaviors, either in positive ways or through justification of negative experiences within the family. In identifying with ethnicity and religion, families established themselves as positive members of multiple cultural groups. Stories of immigration have been part of the American story from its inception, and continue today. The canonical story of the hard-working immigrant making a life in a new world (e.g., Honig, 1998; Steinberg, 1981) was common in the stories. These were generally positive, and the connection to ancestral ethnicity remained several generations after immigration.

At the same time, current culture was also important. Pandit Akkoor, 63, an Asian Indian immigrant, told his son, Sangeet Akkoor, 32, about how he wished he had been a more American father:

> I probably should have learned part of the culture, which is going for camping or doing the activities that the boys are used to doing at here and for going to lake or for fishing. I could learn fishing at that time but I didn't think about those things, no.

In this story, Pandit expressed regret that he did not do more to Americanize his role as a father, based on his lack of knowledge about cultural expectations of fatherhood in a different culture from the one in which he was raised. The importance of being a family was connected to being a culturally appropriate family.

These stories told about how families met social and cultural expectations, not how they fell short of these expectations. Stories of heroism in wars, survival in economic downturns, membership in religious communities, and pride in American culture and ethnic identity all pointed to a larger socialized and socially acceptable family.

Families Work, At Home and Outside

The importance of work and employment to Americans' personal identity has been well established (e.g., Beder, 2000; Bellah et al., 1985). In the fifth theme (*n* = 45), families described working together in a formal business setting, through a family business or business partnership, or informally through collaborative work at home. Family work was talked about predominately as a positive connection and an opportunity for the younger generation to learn about work ethic. Many of the stories were about learning to work from family elders, then passing on those ideals to the younger generation. Family identity as workers was passed down to the younger generations along with a more general sense of the value of work and a strong work ethic. For example, Kirsty Tyler told her nephew about growing up in a large, poor family and being caretaker for her younger siblings as part of her daily life:

> But it taught me to be responsible. It taught me to be hard working, and so there's always there's always good even from hard times I think…all of it made me a hard-workin' girl able to put up with a lot of stuff as I got older.

Kirsty did not hide the fact that the work she was required to do as a child was difficult, nor did she suggest that she enjoyed it. Hard work may not be easy or fun, but it is a valued part of life because it teaches skills for dealing with life. Other stories highlighted the importance of working as a family on the farm and in family business, or learning work from helping parents in small businesses, which Langellier and Peterson (2006b) also found to be an important source of family socialization about work ethic in American culture.

Discussion

Langellier and Peterson (2006a) argued that in group-level ordering, family members simultaneously construct their identity as a family group and as a family in a particular cultural group. Family identity is created through the private relationships *and* experiences within the family and in reference to being part of a larger cultural group, such as middle-class American, a particular ethnicity, or religious type. In storytelling, families perform collective identity not only for themselves and with their own family identity goals in mind, but also for a larger cultural group to which they belong. Part of belonging means performing the proper roles of a member, and families are a team that performs in order to belong to a larger group (Goffman, 1959).

The current study demonstrates multiple ways in which this manifests in publically told stories in the StoryCorps project. Most prominent is the middle-class American identity. While social class and racial data were not always available, a majority of stories in the dataset followed a middle-class American trajectory, including self-reliance and Protestant work ethic that often defines Americans in Bellah et al.'s (1985) analysis of the American individual. The theme of Families Work At Home and Outside showed that work ethic and productivity were important values in family groups, further highlighting the work by Langellier and Peterson (2006b) about work socialization in family storytelling.

In a culture that embraces the philosophy of individualism, the self-made (wo)man, and self-reliance (Steinberg, 1981; Weiss, 1969), the families in the dataset framed their stories of past struggles in terms of how they overcame

them. No stories of help from outside the family or governmental assistance were present. The do-it-yourself identity prevailed instead, allowing family groups to present themselves as self-sufficient and successful families. The absence of stories about ongoing struggles suggested that families want to preserve their team identity in a positive light for the broader public. Perhaps today's struggles will be told by future generations after today's family members overcome the obstacles as a group.

Group identity at both the family and cultural levels also are enabled and constrained through social discourses that are allowed in the telling, as highlighted by Galvin's (2006) concept of discourse dependence in family identity management. In telling stories of struggles, families focused on past instances of perseverance (e.g., the Depression and World War II) rather than current struggles. In the theme of Each Family Is an Island, families discussed not needing outsiders to fulfill their needs, relying instead on their own group for satisfaction and belonging. Yet, they simultaneously evoked their ethnic heritage and those struggles as part of who they are as a family (see Families Follow Cultural Rules (or Don't) for examples), perhaps because those broader cultural issues are part of a larger American mythos of immigration and assimilation. Perhaps this explains the prevalence of family stories that focus on resiliency—while families struggle with hard times, they always manage to overcome them with their own self-reliance.

Narrative Performance Theory was a useful means for uncovering the ways in which families build and maintain their group identity through storytelling. The theory provided a lens through which to examine everyday storytelling works to do more than just make and maintain family memories. It further demonstrates that families do this to exhibit, create and maintain their cultural membership as a group over time and generations.

As discussed in the literature review, a majority of research on family storytelling has focused on private family interaction (e.g., Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999) or on individuals within the family (e.g., Dedaić, 2001). Little research has examined the blend of micro-level family discourse and macro-level cultural discourse in shaping family identity. This study attempted to do both and discovered that families build their identity through performance at level of discourse and interaction, at the family group level, and in conjunction with the cultural discourses that surround it. In other words, families work as a team to present their family identity both to themselves and to the social groups in which they are invested.

StoryCorps was particularly useful in uncovering the blend of private and public discourses. The StoryCorps Project's aims are to honor everyday people and simultaneously gather a cultural history of life in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century (Isay, 2007); therefore at its root, StoryCorps blends the personal and cultural in a way that encourages an examination of how these two aspects of daily life converge. By using stories that are told for private as well as public audiences, the current analysis was able to demonstrate how families talk about themselves both inside the family group and with reference to its connection to the world beyond the group's boundaries. While StoryCorps is a more overt blend of performing family identity for private and public audiences, theorists have argued that this same blend is present in all everyday discourse in the form of a generalized other, or an absent but implied audience (e.g., Mead, 1934). In examining stories told for a public and private audience, this study highlighted that blend in a way that has not been done before. The results indicated that families tacitly understand and reference this unseen audience. Thus, further research should attempt to understand how families manage their identity through both micro-level and macro-level discourse.

There are, of course, limitations to this study. First and foremost is the lack of racial diversity in the StoryCorps sample. While there were examples of African American, Asian, and Latino cultures, they were few. While the

random sampling from the StoryCorps collection meant I had no control over the ethnic and racial make-up of the sample, this is a lack I had hoped to overcome by the use of StoryCorps, particularly given the aim of StoryCorps is in part to include a broad racial and ethnic diversity in its collection (Isay, 2007). Perhaps future research within the StoryCorps collection should weight sample populations with reference to race and ethnicity to include a broader diversity of families.

Likewise, the middle class sensibility minimizes other notions of what it means to be an American family. For example, the issues of self-reliance and the self-made man may not resonate as strongly for those who struggle to make ends meet month after month, or for those who have felt the roadblocks of racism. More recent immigrants, largely from Mexico and other Latin American countries, may have a very different story to tell of being American or dual cultured than those who came largely from Europe several generations ago. Further, it must be noted that families currently struggling with issues of poverty, ethnocentrism, racism, and other obstacles may not have the time or ability to be part of the StoryCorps Project, or to participate in research more broadly. Their inability to be a part of these kinds of projects only further emphasizes the absence of a full spectrum of people in academic research.

While some mention of family flaws were present, their relative absence may be due to the performance risks of telling negative stories, as discussed previously. However, this absence may also be because families who truly have experienced insurmountable or rampant dysfunction are unwilling to participate in a public-oriented project such as StoryCorps. The findings of this study should not be used to promote an overly idealistic or problem-free view of the United States in the early 21st century. These findings must not blind researchers or the public to the real plights of the poor, the disenfranchised, and the abused populations that live in our midst.

Lastly, while the goal of the study was to provide thick description in order to ensure confirmability and transferability in the data analysis, ultimately the thickness was limited by the sparse knowledge about the participants. The StoryCorps Project does not require extensive personal information to be revealed about participants, so the current study could only elaborate on the details provided by the participants. Thus, the ability to draw broader conclusions about the family in the social group was limited. While it would be preferable to have more extensive personal information, as is more common in family communication research, this project instead focused on examining family identity with a broad variety of participants in a broad range of families. While the lack of personal details was a shortcoming, the ultimate contribution of this study was balanced through the incorporation of a broader range of families and stories.

Future research should take into further consideration the role of public performance in the telling of family stories, whether for a literal, non-familial audience or for an unseen, hypothetical audience. Specifically with StoryCorps, given that the public audience is implied overtly in the very nature of the project, the recording technology bridges the seen and the unseen. More work should be done to theorize the impact of public telling of private family stories, perhaps through reality television and family stories or management of family identity through social network communication, such as Facebook or family blogs.

Overall, future research should expand on the various ways in which families come to understand themselves as a particular group within a cultural context, and in terms of membership in social groups. The blend of public and private family identity clearly was shown in the current study, but future research might apply these ideas to more spontaneous, everyday storytelling interaction. However, any recording of natural family talk, even in the participants' home or other everyday environments, alters the "naturalness" of interaction. If families know they are being ob-

served directly or through recording, they will be performing for themselves but also for the broader audience that will be analyzing them, and eventually reading the research report. Thus, all research on family communication is studying public performance at some level, and future research should take this reality into consideration in understanding how families communicate and relate to one another as a group, and as a group that is part of a larger cultural group.

This study provided insight into the process of family identity building through storytelling about the family. Results indicate that families tell stories that reveal and maintain their group identity over multiple generations and in personal ways, while simultaneously acknowledging and performing to a larger cultural audience. The family is not an isolated group that functions apart from culture, but a group that is enmeshed with cultural ideas of what a good family is. Through knowledge of the cultural expectations and group norms, the family performs itself as one will be seen a *good* family both to its members and to the cultural audience that is ever present in the telling. Storytelling is an important link between experience and meaning making, and families tell stories to make sense of their connection each other and their social groups.

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