

# KALEIDOSCOPE

*a graduate journal of qualitative communication research*

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**Submission period for Fall 2004 NCA issue:**

**January 1, 2004 - May 15, 2004**

*Kaleidoscope* is a refereed, annually published print and electronic journal devoted to Communication Studies graduate students who work at the intersections of *philosophy, theory, and/or practical application of qualitative, interpretive, and critical/cultural communication research*. Particular areas of engagement for consideration include both traditional and experimental approaches. We encourage contributions that are rigorous and lively, and that are attentive to scholarship without sacrificing creativity or consequence—while we seek to cultivate the currently developing, we do not wish to sacrifice rigor and quality in pursuit of novelty.

We believe that the kind of exposure *Kaleidoscope* can offer to graduate students is both an educational and professional asset during a time when some of the most energizing new disciplinary research is done in areas that focus on qualitative approaches to communicative interaction. Because its attention is devoted to current graduate students' developments in qualitative, interpretive, and critical/cultural work and is a collaborative review endeavor of faculty and graduate students, we believe that *Kaleidoscope* will develop a perspective that is unique among Communication Studies journals.

We welcome manuscripts, during the submission period, from graduate students in Communication Studies and cognate areas/disciplines who are currently enrolled at the time of submission. Each manuscript submitted to *Kaleidoscope* will receive a blind assessment by two outside reviewers, (1) a faculty member and (2) an advanced Ph.D. student. The Editorial Board members are drawn from a diverse array of universities and primarily from the Communication Studies discipline, and they include those whose work and interests focus on scholarship *Kaleidoscope* hopes to cultivate.

Please submit 3 copies of your manuscript. Although there is no minimum page limit, manuscripts should be no longer than 25 pages (double-spaced) or 7,000 words (including notes and references) and can be prepared following MLA, APA, or Chicago style. Manuscripts should include an abstract of no more than 150 words and have a detached title page listing the title, your name, institutional affiliation, address, phone number, and email address. If your manuscript is accepted for publication (with suggested revisions or not), you will be asked to resubmit an electronic version of your manuscript (with necessary revisions, if applicable) to [kalscope@siu.edu](mailto:kalscope@siu.edu).

Manuscripts submitted for consideration should be mailed to:

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## Editor's note

There is no one way to do interpretive, qualitative inquiry. We [qualitative researchers] are all *bricoleurs* stuck in the present working against the past as we move toward the future.

(Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln,  
"Transforming Qualitative Research Methods" 352)

The term *bricoleur* describes the authors in this, the inaugural refereed issue of *Kaleidoscope*. These are qualitative graduate student researchers who use "any and all methods of inquiry to form better interpretations of ongoing social life" (Denzin and Lincoln 349). It was nearly a decade ago that Denzin and Lincoln anticipated a new generation of scholars whose work would embrace pluralistic qualitative approaches, whose positionalities and perspectives would deeply and deliberately inform who and how they studied, and whose diverse and candid voices would join those scholars who came before them. The graduate student authors in the following pages realize a range of contemporary qualitative research practices by using divergent tools of inquiry in creative and resourceful ways. In so doing, their work speaks to past qualitative practices and paradigms, challenging some, aligning with others, and looking forward by rehearsing still more innovative forms. They are *bricoleurs* who, ultimately, have valuable stories to tell.

Lincoln and Denzin recognize that we, qualitative researchers,  
cobble together stories that we may tell each other, some to share our profoundest links with those whom we studied; some to help us see how we can right a wrong or relieve oppression; some to help us and others to understand how and why we did what we did, and how it all went very wrong; and some simply to sing of difference. ("The Seventh Moment" 1061)

The tales told in the following pages echo these purposes in numerous ways. Miguel Malagrega begins this issue by telling a story of past injustices in Argentina and connecting a critical reading of those injustices with an understanding of how theory can (and does) inform everyday cultural practices by helping to mitigate oppressive circumstances. His work examines a troubled politico-cultural past and shows how that history always already includes energies that can illuminate a brighter future. His study throws hope and agency into relief against a backdrop of seemingly hopeless circumstances. Similarly, Alice Filmer's performative piece narrates deeply personal and traumatic experiences of violated boundaries. In it, she finds hope, forgiveness, and the possibility of healing in bleak circumstances. The lessons offered in this essay are subtle and are rendered from a place of profound vulnerability. At the same time, we are moved from that personal space to a place of community when those subtle lessons suggest broader implications for how we might think differently about boundaries, resisting rigid *either/or* frames by choosing *both/and* ways of knowing and being.

Marc Leverette explores theoretical boundaries, suggesting paths toward a bridge that would bring into dialogue those who study media environments from a semiotic perspective and those interested in how the medium delivers the message. This article celebrates difference, appreciating what each perspective brings to bear on questions of meaning production while, simultaneously, recognizing how each paradigm can (and ought to) reach out to the other. His is a look back to traditional oppositions in order to decipher how, together, those traditions might be brought productively forward. In her piece, Yuko Kawai also returns to historical discourses in order to critically examine how they impact current politico-cultural thinking and practices. Revisiting the textual origins of the model minority myth, she re-presents a narrative that promoted (and, indeed, continues to promote) a "colorblind" worldview. Far from creating a culture of racial inclusion, she argues, the myth, instead, tells a story in which all participants, regardless of race, can "make it" in a free and equal society -- if only they work hard enough. A historical understanding of how this tale began and how it has gone so very wrong helps us understand, in part, how current racist practices of discrimination are possible in macro and micro relationships.

Kim Gatz, in her study, considers how social support relationships and networks can help people when they find themselves in a stressful, life-changing situation. Choosing as her site of inquiry a community of “mothers of multiples,” Gatz finds that interpersonal communication in the form of emotional sustenance, instrumental assistance, and informational guidance creates resources for mothers in their productively managing a sometimes overwhelming positionality. And, bringing this issue to a close, Rochelle Robertson explores positionalities of both teachers and students in public speaking classrooms. Through a narrative approach, she unpacks a “moment” with a particular student in a public speaking course she taught, a moment when things seemed to go very wrong. Taking up this past experience as the catalyst for a critical consideration of her own current teaching practices, Robertson points to future possibilities of generative alternatives to power-over instruction. She embraces a power-sharing ethic of care and advocates for teaching practices that can dialogically connect students with teachers in a classroom community where public speaking becomes a liberatory, rather than demoralizing, exercise.

As the authors in this issue demonstrate, there are multiple qualitative approaches that use a variety of methodological tools to tell diverse stories in abundantly different forms. Our graduate student community of qualitative researchers is a healthy one, and its members will continue to tell their tales, shaping them in response to others’ narratives, and looking forward to what they can contribute to what comes next. It is our intention at *Kaleidoscope* to continue to make the space for new voices, innovative approaches, and valuable stories that can help us make sense of complex human communication processes.

Finally, I would be remiss in neglecting to acknowledge that this issue of *Kaleidoscope* is the result of a professional rehearsal process, one in which many played a role and without whom this issue would have been impossible to realize. My deep appreciation to Ron Pelias for his vision and for all the many times he dropped everything to help actualize it. I offer my gratitude, as well, to Craig Gingrich-Philbrook for his astute advice and insightful suggestions along the way. Of course, editing processes are never one-person endeavors, and this issue is also the result of a collaborative effort with associate editors, Jessica Tomell-Presto and Adrienne Viramontes; thank you for your excellent work, which made mine so much easier. To the editorial board members, I offer my recognition of the vital roles you played in making the scholarly possibilities in this issue an actuality; your collegiality and your prompt, constructive comments set an admirable professional standard. Thanks, also, to Jay Brower for his assistance in this regard. I owe Jonny Gray a special debt of gratitude for his considerable assistance and support in the early stages of setting up the structures and practices of the journal, and to Lenore Langsdorf, whose editorial mentorship created the conditions for the possibility of establishing those structures and practices. I appreciate, too, Nathan Stucky’s efforts in finding the means this year, during awfully difficult times, to support the journal’s editorship position. Also, we offer our gratitude to SIUC’s Graduate and Professional Student Council and to the Office of Vice Chancellor for Research for making this issue, in its printed format, possible. Finally, thanks to the Speech Communication Organization (Sandra Calderon Garza, president; Kathryn Ziegler, immediate past president) for their support and cooperation.

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## **Psychoanalytic Theory and Everyday Cultural Politics: A Critical Reading of the Argentinean Crisis of 2001**

**Miguel A. Malagrecá**

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*The December 2001 Argentinean crisis was accompanied by a series of profound cultural re-ensembles. The massive engagement of people banging kitchen pots in the streets represented a form of social struggle against the political class' apathy that can be read following the psychoanalytic conception of family complexes. The author, first, explores subjectivity as a result of these complexes and then examines the value of the psychoanalytic thesis of the family as a psychological complex for cultural studies. Two subjective positions are identified, rivalry (sameness) and difference (otherness). Rivalry is discussed in the context of telenovelas, and the author argues that this subject position is destructively exploited in these popular narratives. Difference is discussed in the context of everyday cultural politics, and the author argues that embracing this subject position helped Argentinean families creatively and productively re-imagine and re-work the socio-political conditions in which they were immersed during the 2001 crisis.*

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In the seventies, Martín-Baró (1976) warned the human and social disciplines of the risks of their becoming refined instruments of social control. His claim was that the objective of a genuine “psy” field was, first and foremost, to help *liberate* human beings by showing the double inscription of the subject within society and of society within the subject. This double inscription allows for an understanding, on the part of human beings, that their subjectivity is never fixed, but can be reconceived in creative and productive positions in relation to society. Double inscription also means society can be reconceived in the same way in relation to the subject. For those of us who work both with subjectivity (in psychology and in psychoanalysis) and cultural studies, Martín-Baró’s warning can be understood as a call for political awareness and social responsibility. His work seems to declare that our theories—the theories we choose to describe and construct our worlds—are never, and should never be, divorced from our politics. The individual subject *is* the political subject. Reading his words almost thirty years after they were written reminds

me of the meaning displacements that have occurred in some trends of academic scholarship, shifts from using words like “revolution,” “freedom,” and “liberation” (frequently used in the 70s), to using words such as “resistance,” “struggle,” and “opposition.” What do these linguistic shifts imply for the way we conceive of theory and politics? In the dawn of a new millennium, Martín-Baró’s warning challenges human and social disciplines by, again, asking a question we may never finish trying to answer: how do we express the connection between our theories and our everyday politics?

After a year of studying in the U.S., I read again in my diary a conversation I once had with a classmate here. Having told her that, in Argentina, the country from which I come, psychoanalysis is a common practice in public hospitals, and that psychoanalysts engage in community work, she replied: “Oh, so psychoanalysts in Latin America are closer to our social workers.” I went on to tell her about my personal work with families during the Argentinean crisis of December 2001. I told her about the teamwork in which I participated—work aimed at recovering the identity of illegally appropriated children kidnapped during the last dictatorship in Argentina.<sup>1</sup> Later, in an empathetic response to the Argentinean children’s plight, she told me that she had been abused as a child. There was a long silence, after which she told me that she remembered a friend telling her, sarcastically, that she would need years of therapy. “But I am strong, you know,” she said. “Psychoanalysis is sometimes for really *fucked up* people.” She apologized immediately after saying so and added, “I mean, [psychoanalysis is] too highbrow, you know? Too intellectual, a Woody Allen thing.” That night, in bed, I could not help thinking about my friend’s words and how valuable they were in connection to my reflections about Martín-Baró’s warning. If my friend believed psychoanalysis was disconnected from the people, how could I show her that she is wrong? How could I show her the relationships between psychoanalysis, culture, and everyday politics? I, then, thought about writing an article describing some considerations about psychoanalysis and cultural studies.

### **Background Considerations**

I have previously encountered the provocative intersection between psychoanalysis and cultural studies by working with problems of culture and identity (Malagrega, 2003; 2002a; 2002b). I recognize that cultural studies<sup>2</sup> and psychoanalysis can benefit from a closer collaboration with one another and that psychoanalytic theory has, in fact, informed cultural studies in many ways. The Lacanian interpretation of the unconscious as being like

a language, for instance, is pivotal in cultural studies' analysis of culture and subjectivity (Hall, 1996b). What's more, although the Freudian skepticism toward the ideal of progress was already central in Horkheimer and Adorno's (1947) critique of the Enlightenment, the psychoanalytic conceptualization of a Symbolic order came to revitalize critical cultural studies' understanding of subjection to the State and to cultural institutions like the family (Held, 1980). Also, compelling critiques of Lacanian psychoanalysis not only helped de-totalize cultural identity as fixed, but also challenged the view that psychoanalysis is a hetero-normative discourse. The first identity politics movements that appeared in France after 1968 criticized psychoanalysis as "the strongest individual counterrevolutionary force in the ideology of sexual politics" (Millet, cited in Zaretsky, 1994, p. 200). These same movements returned to read Freud and Lacan throughout the 1990s by incorporating psychoanalysis as a ground from which to theorize aspects of the normative structure of gender and race, or the contradictory dynamics between femininity and feminism (Aulagnier Spairani, 1967; Cixous, 1981; Chodorow, 1992; Copjec, 2003; Dolto, 1981; Irigaray, 1985; Kristeva, 1980; McRobbie, 1996; Mitchell, 1984), identity performativity (Bourcier, 2001; Butler, 1997), queer identity (Bersani, 2002; De Laurentis, 1993; Dean, 2000), and ideologies of nationalism (Bhabha, 1993; Spivak, 2001). Finally, Lacan's reading of Marx's plus-value as *plus-de-jour* (or surplus *jouissance*) inspired some of the most provocative thoughts about psychoanalysis, popular culture, and Marxism (Jameson, 1998; Žižek, 1992, 1998).

In light of this background, I hope to show in this article that cultural studies and psychoanalysis share a distinctive perspective on the notion of subjectivity, together offer an invaluable critique of culture and language, and both offer means for employing committed practices that can work against hegemonic discourses and social domination. In what follows, however, I do not try to reduce cultural studies' conceptualizations of identity and culture to psychoanalysis'—or vice versa. At the same time, while recognizing conceptual divergences, I suggest that it is from these tensive theoretical spaces that the most provocative thoughts may emerge.

In the pages that follow, I explore several intersections of psychoanalysis and cultural studies by looking at some ways in which families in Argentina have struggled and continue to struggle in order to stand against and survive a particularly significant cultural crisis: the Argentinean crisis of December 2001. The imposition of dictatorial governments, the progressive decomposition of the State, and the establishment of neo-liberal economic programs in the region by the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank brought about this crisis, which affects a large majority of South American countries. In Argentina, in particular, the crisis reached dramatic proportions in December 2001. It is through an examination of

various aspects of the crisis that I hope to illustrate, first, that psychoanalytic thought can create tension with and, therefore, empower a cultural studies' understanding of identity. Second, by accentuating an interpretation centered in subjectivity and popular culture, I hope to make clear that cultural resistance movements, like those in Argentina, cannot be reduced to economic variables, no matter how pivotal those variables may be.

Today, the most tragic aspects of the on-going December 2001 crisis I discuss include the reality that dozens of children are dying of starvation in the province of Tucumán; more than 20 percent of the inhabitants are unemployed; and, thousands of individuals earn only between 2 and 10 dollars a day. Moreover, the State has been almost completely dismantled; there is a state of emergency throughout the country concerning sanitary conditions and systems; the Supreme Court is divided and its authority is weakened by corruption; and, an apathetic and, thus, ineffective political class rules the country. Given this scenario, the long-term consequences of the crisis are still uncertain. The weight of economic variables in the occurrence of the crisis is undeniable. However, if we choose to focus solely on economic variables, it becomes far too easy to disregard an urgently important interpretation of the many diverse culturally resistant dimensions of the crisis. The economic and cultural coexist in opposition to and in alliance with each other; economic factors shape the cultural landscape and, at the same time, cultural complexes shape economic constructs.

In the following section, against this background, I explore the theoretical construction of *identity*, *subject positions*, and *family complexes* in psychoanalytic thought, discuss its relevance for cultural studies, and identify two subject positions useful in cultural analysis: *rivalry* and *difference*. Next, I examine a paradigmatic case of Argentinean *telenovelas* in order to identify how this popular culture fragment exploits a particular subject position, rivalry, in relation to family complexes. Finally, I offer some critical, personal reflections with respect to the crisis in order to contest *telenovela* rivalry narratives by illustrating how recognizing *difference* can act as a productive cultural force.

### **Identity, Subjectivity, and Family Complexes**

In this section, I examine the psychoanalytic conception of the family as a psychical<sup>3</sup> complex (Lacan, 1938). With respect to the problem of *identity*, which is central to any consideration about the family, I consider the notion of psychical or subjective identity as traversing the epistemological construction of the subject in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In other words, acknowledging that Lacanian theory is suspicious of the concept of identity, it is from this suspicion that a different theory of

identity can emerge. It is a theory not centered in the *ego* or in the *self*, but instead is concerned with consequences of the de-centering of the subject in culture and for politics.

Jacques Lacan used the word *identity* in his early works with some frequency (Lacan, 1933; 1938; 1948; 1949), paying special attention to psychical formation within the family. For more than ten years, he defended a Durkhemian theory of the family; however, he subsequently abandoned this approach in 1953 due to the influence of Levi-Strauss's work. Lacan's preliminary theory of the family relied on the decline of the image of the father in conjugal Western families as critical for understanding clinical structures and personality disorders (Zafropoulos, 2002). Lacan's second theory of the family was based on linguistic and structural-anthropological considerations. Lacan no longer supported the thesis that the presence or absence of the father could alter psychical identity. Instead, he insisted on the autonomous function of the signifier (the Name-of-the-Father), thus endowing our understanding of the human subject with a symbolic uniqueness. If one wanted to continue using the term *identity* for heuristic or communication purposes, it would only be in this very restricted sense (of the mark of the signifier) that the term could be maintained within a Lacanian framework.

In light of these considerations, there are at least two perspectives in which Lacanian theory can illuminate the problem of identity in cultural studies. The first, emphasized by cultural theorists like Stuart Hall, characterizes identity as de-centered (Hall, 1996b). Hall's reading draws attention to the imaginary constitution of the *Ego*. It appears apparent that the ego (or individuality) is a derivative, aggregated formation, the result of a drama that develops gradually when the infant is confronted with the dialectic of *imagos* (special, primordial images that conform to the structure of the Ego). The second perspective appears in the teaching of Lacan after the 1950s, and is characterized, first, by the primacy of the signifier and, later, by a topological model of knots that tie subjectivity to the *Real*, *Symbolic*, and *Imaginary* registers. Although outside the scope of this essay, it could be said that, in this movement, the question of *identity* is complicated by the fact that the subject is an effect of the crossing points between the order of language, the dialectic of images, and what cannot be signified (the register of the Real).

Psychoanalytic clinical experience also demonstrates the pivotal function of the family (as a psychical complex) in the constitution of the subject (Freud, 1912; Klein, 1961; Lacan, 1938). In the process of constituting the subject, parental desire allocates a place for the subject-to-be, even before the subject is born. Examples of this allocation are the

wide spectrum of traditions, rites, and negotiations that function in the moment of naming the subject-to-be, which have significance in all cultures.

Hence, before the subject appropriates language, it is appropriated by language, is read by an Other<sup>1</sup> as a text in a foreign language: the infants' crying, laughing, and disarticulated movements need to be translated (Kristeva, 1980). (This Other, a function often ascribed to the mother of the child, is at the same time a subject of desire, a subject-in-lack, and not a completed Phallic Other. He or she is also traversed by the Symbolic.) Therefore, subjectivity is always already there, articulated in language even before the infant can articulate a single word. Subjectivity appears to us as the effect of a translating operation. From this appropriation into language by an Other, the sender-receiver communication pattern is inverted, for the subject appears in relation to the function of reading by an Other, who decodes a message even before it has been encoded. This operation alters the idea of a self-centered identity derived from the Cartesian *cogito*. For psychoanalysis, human identity cannot be defined by its *eidos* (i.e., what gives someone or something its essential nature), but by its *alter eidos*, (i.e., the structure of language). In this sense, it is more appropriate to talk about *subject positions* rather than discussing fixed or essential identity per se.

Clinical practice confirms that it is within families that the subject comes to articulate the Symbolic Law in particular terms, and this articulation takes place through a dialectic located in the Oedipal drama. It is in this drama that three subjective dimensions are conjugated: *Universal, Singular, and Particular*. The status of the Universal relies on an order or logic that affects all human beings. Because we are subjected to a Universal that antecedes us, the Universal cannot be named; rather, we are named by the Universal. This Universality is only partially reflected in the norms and codes of Particular cultures and agents (this difference between Universal and Particular explains why the term "Name-of-the-Father" refers to a Universal, Symbolic function and not to an agent or person of any particular sex). There is no Universal without the support of its manifestations in the Particular values and norms of cultures (Fariña 1992, 1999).

The Universal order is understood as Symbolic, the order of language (or the order of Law) that operates through the function of *interdiction*. In English, interdiction means banning, prohibition, or veto; it also means something that is implicated in the structure of language. In some languages, this second meaning is clear: *interdicción* in Spanish, *interdizione* in Italian, and *interdiction* in French all indicate that Law says something (it *dictates*). In this sense, then, it could be said that Law works *through* language –although the Symbolic order itself cannot be

reduced to the structure of language. Symbolic Law mediates (*interrelates*) between subjects, not by force, but by signs (*interdictates*). The operation of interdiction, being a Symbolic act, results in a *Singular* subject, which is its effect.

The human subject is, therefore, an effect of symbolic operations, which are supported in family complexes. Families (the psychological complex I am describing here and not necessarily the Western model of families) are one of the forms in all cultures where these three dimensions – Universal, Singular, and Particular — become articulated. At the same time, the different *models* of families are organized around diverse sets of cultural values and distinctive moralities that vary in different social groups (Particular). The inscription of the subject (Singular), then, is constituted by a refraction and articulation of the Symbolic Law (Universal) within the family.

Taking these three dimensions as primary, families can be understood as cultural complexes that constitute subjectivity. They do so, on the one hand, by inscribing humans as psychological subjects via the power of a primordial signifier (the Name-of-the-Father), thus creating a desiring being. The dependency of the human being at the moment of birth calls for an Other to signify primary needs and to prompt the process that transmutes needs (purely biological) into desire (psychical). Thus, human identity is always characterized by its incompleteness, for what distinguishes desire is the impossibility of its full satisfaction. The relationship of the infant with the signifying power of the Other might be the most primitive form of a power relation with which the subject engages. This power relation reappears in every subjective crisis following the series of weaning, intrusion, Oedipus, puberty and adolescence (Lacan, 1938). For the subject to survive, this rudimentary encounter with power entails revolutionary consequences. It should not be the mark of a totalizing form of power, though. In the best-case scenario, it should mean for the subject that complete domination is not possible; rather, there is always the chance of de-totalization or de-territorialization. Otherwise, the subject may precipitate in psychosis.

On the other hand, family complexes constitute subjectivity by inscribing the subject in the cultural realm – that is, by making the subject assume a position in relation to the Symbolic. Sigmund Freud (1912) demonstrates that Norms (the prohibition of incest) and Crime (parricide) are in the origins of the human condition, and that for the subject the derivative form of this origin is, as clinical work demonstrates, the symbolic inscription of guilt.<sup>5</sup> The subject is inscribed in the culture realm by acknowledging the weight of the symbolic law. Given this Law, narcissistic, imagined self-sufficiency (*ego*) must yield if it is to make the transition from *rivalry* (sameness) to *difference* (otherness).

## Rivalry and Difference

To be inscribed in the symbolic order is to be related to an instance of alterity, to something that is impersonal and external to *my-self*. *Rivalry* is understood here as a model of a relationship with the other that obliterates subjectivity by not recognizing the singularity of the other (his/her being *different*). Because of the influence of imaginary components in relational rivalries, the fundamental elements of rivalry can be traced back to the conformation of the *I*. In the Lacanian model of the mirror stage, the subject does not distinguish itself, at first, from the image in the mirror with which it is alienated. In a second phase, there is a form of identification with a substitute of this alienating image (e.g., a sibling). A primary *I* is constituted together with its rival, which is in conflict with the Other's desire. The captivating power of these images comes to what could be called an "end" when the primary imaginary *I* yields to a social, symbolic *I* (Lacan, 1949) by means of the parental interdiction. By differentiating two subject positions—*rivalry* (sameness) versus *difference* (otherness)—psychoanalytic theory illuminates the intersection of subjectivity and culture.

In other words, I am suggesting that Lacanian thought helps us discriminate two subjective positions<sup>6</sup> that emerge from family complexes and that are indispensable for the kind of cultural analysis I offer in the next two sections. One subject position, rivalry (sameness), helps constitute and, thus, perpetuates enmity, competition, and indiscrimination in cultural complexes. The subject does not recognize (or chooses not to recognize) the other as different because, by doing so, the subject would have to recognize the limits of the human existence. In Freudian terms, it would imply the recognition of the Castration Complex: the other is limited or castrated and, therefore, "so am I." By positioning him/herself in rivalry with the other, the subject avoids confronting this limit or Castration in the other, but the price he/she pays is high: by supporting the other as rival, the subject collapses under images that will, finally, obliterate him/her.

The second subjective position, difference (otherness), recognizes that the other to whom *I* relate is a different subject, an Alter instance who never completely concurs with my *self*. The existence of the possibility of recognizing the other as an-other subject (i.e., limited, different, not-plenum, not-complete) is, in part, what differentiates the presuppositions of psychoanalytic thought from humanistic philosophy: to acknowledge the other as a subject implies that the *I* become, at least momentarily, an object *for* the other, not *as* the other.

In relation to these psychoanalytic considerations, then, we can now posit the following questions for cultural studies: (1) How are family complexes represented in popular culture?; (2) What are the modes through which these complexes are decoded?; and, (3) What forms do the consolidation of family complexes take in culture? If rivalry and difference appear as two subjective positions emergent from the family complexes, it may be useful to explore how these positions, in Argentinean culture, are exploited in popular culture and politics.

### **Rivalry and *Telenovelas***

I move, in this section, from the psychoanalytic understanding of the family to illustrating the way families have been recently portrayed in a fragment of popular culture in Argentina: the *telenovela*. *Telenovelas* offer a promising avenue for study because they can be understood as another complex, a representational one, in much the same way that families are complexes. The TV shows I discuss here disparage the most radical components of working class family struggles following the crisis in December 2001. Although I believe (alongside Stuart Hall) that TV can function beyond the mere reproduction of hegemonic ideology, my aim here is to problematize the insistence of representations of family rivalry in *telenovelas* in order to demonstrate the usefulness of psychoanalytic thought in performing cultural analysis.

Scholarly literature conceptualizing *telenovelas* is extensive, and studies focus on structure and narrative, usually arguing they reflect issues of nationality and identity. Structurally speaking, *telenovelas* are similar to US American soap operas in that they are serial programs and (usually) melodramatic. According to Acosta-Alzuru (2003), however, unlike soaps, *telenovelas* have a finite number of episodes (120-200); their viewers expect a definitive conclusion to the story; they are financed by television networks and broadcast both in primetime and in the afternoon block; and, they determine the celebrity system for Latin American actors, who usually perform in various *telenovelas* at the same time or over a span of years. Against the traditional model of *telenovelas*, a recent postmodern style of *telenovela* has emerged that breaks custom to include social and cultural issues in the Latin American context. Carolina Acosta-Alzuru (2003) underlines characteristics of this type of *telenovela* and suggests that one prominent aspect is its presentation of a complex personal universe, which is in contrast to the rather reductive universe offered in “traditional” programs. This postmodern *telenovela* also combines personal and social problems in a narrative fiction that speaks to the audience in terms of a shared reality.

Currently, there are three Argentinean postmodern *telenovelas* – *Soy Gitano* (I am Gypsy), *Costumbres Argentinas* (Argentinean Customs), and *Malandras* (Rascals) – that use a similar narrative structure and that are concerned with the typical, working class Argentinean family with respect to its identity and social reality. This is most clear in the case of *Soy Gitano*, a *telenovela* that also problematizes –sometimes in farfetched, melodramatic ways— the psychology of the characters. For instance, the gypsies depicted in *Soy Gitano* bear little resemblance to the gypsy communities living in Argentina and, in this sense, the representations are irresponsible in their perpetuation of disrespectfully inaccurate images of a cultural minority. Perhaps the fact that *Soy Gitano* was meant to be a light summer production, which usually translates into a lower production budget, explains the exaggeration in the psychological profile of the characters, the reduced number of cameras, the construction of kitsch sets, and even the careless direction. Even with all these problems, however, this *telenovela* continued to be aired longer than expected because of its immediate popular success.

Perhaps nowhere else has rivalry been more apparent than in this contemporary Argentinean *telenovela*. As a recent newspaper article suggested (“El cielo y el infierno,” 2003) in *Soy Gitano*, hostility becomes an issue of defending one’s identity. In other words, rivalry serves to reify a sense of identity, even to the extent that it becomes honorable to give one’s life for it. Obedience to the father and to the Man in general, however, is never questioned in the narrative. In this sense, *Soy Gitano* reminds us of the Totemic father described by Freud (1912) as the tyrant of the primitive herd in relation to whom the sons define themselves (their *selves*) and, at the same time, against whom they rebel. In the case of this Argentinean *telenovela*, the two families who stand against each other, the Heredias and the Amayas, seem trapped in a love-hate relationship: each group needs the other to define their own identity. But, defining one’s being through the other is only possible if the other is annihilated – two subjects cannot occupy the same position. The Heredias and the Amaya develop a growing hate for each other that takes degenerative forms including uncle-niece relationships, two brothers dueling for the same woman, and a devastated former girlfriend who reclaims her beloved from the arms of another woman by attempting suicide. In psychoanalytic terms, while trying to define their own (reified sense of) identity, the subjects collide with one another. Since this other is not recognized as different, however, it is more proper to say that these subjects collide with their own image reflected onto the other.



Love, passion, and prohibition are represented in the relationship between Amador Heredia (Osvaldo Laport) and Mora Amaya (Julieta Diaz), who ignore they belong to the same clan.  
*Soy Gitano*, Pol-Ka productions  
Used by permission

The construction of the Gypsy women is another element related to rivalry, particularly with respect to interdiction. The Gypsy woman represents, alternatively, the two “ideal” types of *woman*: the *Absolute Mother* and the *Phallic Woman*. In either case, what is at stake is the possibility of evading interdiction. The Absolute Mother escapes symbolic castration by *possessing* the phallus that regulates male interactions within the clan (as the female character’s control of the Gypsy money in the *La Gavilana* exemplifies). The Phallic Woman escapes it by *being* the phallus that captivates male desire (as in the case of Amparo, the Gypsy Woman who, through various forms of magic, knows how to enchant and manipulate the male desire). What we have here is the woman as an “ideal” sex type, or the reduction of women’s subjectivity to an imaginary, phallic-centered, representation of women as beyond the influence of interdiction.

Interdiction, the symbolic process through which the other can be recognized as different, is, therefore, not fully in attendance in this narrative. In the opening episode of *Soy Gitano*, for example, the head of the Amaya family exhorts his daughter not to have sexual intercourse with her step-brother by making this statement: “I prohibit you mingling with a Heredia! They always keep what you want the most” (“El cielo y el infierno,” 2003). This statement articulates an imaginary logic (*the other always has what my Ego wants the most*) and, therefore, has no symbolic interdicting value. Given this circumstance, it is no surprise that the young members of the Heredia and the Amaya clan *mock* the paternal authorities of each family. In psychoanalytic terms, this mocking translates as follows: the subject who plays in the field of the other (in the logic of things that are wanted in order to give the Ego an illusory

completeness) wanders in a circuit of rivalry and, hence, does not walk on the path of emancipation (difference).

With respect to this cultural fragment, then, rivalry is a relationship that is exploited in contemporary narratives. As I have demonstrated, rivalry is not “natural,” but produced; it troubles the dichotomy of the individual and the sociological; it has a meaning that can be deciphered; and, it is not acontextually discrete, but is historical. This insistence on rivalry in *telenovelas*, the construction of reified identities, and the compulsion to define group ascriptions are all elements chosen to create *one*, but certainly not the *only*, narrative of the Argentinean cultural crisis. In order to oppose these imaginary narratives, other stories should be written that emphasize the Argentinean peoples’ struggle to survive, that honor their creative alternatives to a dominant paradigm, and that accentuate their voices as they speak out against an ominous violence: the silence of the political class.

### **Rivalry Resisted: Difference and Everyday Cultural Politics**

In this section, I move to another, more personal standpoint in order to tell a different story, a counter-narrative that resists the prevailing fictions of rivalry often depicted in *telenovelas*. In so doing, I offer a reinterpretation of the role of working families in a way that departs from the representation of rivalry in some *telenovelas*. I begin by contextualizing the crisis on which I reflect.

Before 2001, a decade-long political project promised a productive revolution in Argentina. Carlos Menem’s administration altered the public landscape of Argentina by dismantling the National State and selling public reserves to transnational corporations and private individuals. These actions resulted in one of the deepest economic disasters ever experienced in Argentina. The following administration pledged democratic renovation and social justice. The new President elected was Fernando De La Rúa, from the Radical party, whereas the new Vice President, Carlos Alvarez, represented a democratic left. De La Rúa’s short and inefficient administration cracked shortly after taking power following Alvarez’s resignation. In December 2001, a series of interlinked political events led to De La Rúa’s resignation. Political unrest, muggings, street chaos, anxiety, and, brutal police repression followed. Several international banks closed their doors blocking the money deposited in bank accounts. Companies closed down, leaving thousands of people without jobs. A handful of provisional presidents, one after another in the course of a week, could not control the crisis. Carlos Duhalde was later offered the provisional administration of the national cabinet. He

assumed the transitory presidency surrounded by popular skepticism and anxiety. Finally, on May 18, 2003, a new democratic administration was elected to govern the country.

With this backdrop in place, I return, now, to December 2001. During that month and the months that followed the presidential resignation, working-class families engaged in massive protest actions aimed at bringing attention to the political class' hypocrisy, corruption, and deceitfulness. Family members came out into the streets and paralyzed traffic by banging their kitchen pots and lighting bonfires on the pavement; protesters also turned off the lights in their apartments, and/or unplugged the telephones in unison, thus creating a significant loss in profits for private companies.



Parents, teenagers, and children usually came out to the streets together to demonstrate during December 2001.  
Photo: Humberto Farro, FotoRevista  
Used by permission.

During this time of massive protests, my work schedule was divided between a clinical practice in psychoanalysis, my research work in human rights, and my responsibilities as an Assistant Professor at the University of Buenos Aires. The repercussions of the crisis were immediate for me. Two patients lost their jobs and two others could no longer afford their sessions. The crisis appeared repeatedly in their work with me. In most cases, the patients and I decided to continue the analysis, postponing any immediate resolution that degraded or reduced the process of analysis to a contractual or monetary transaction. In one case, a patient started missing his sessions following the presidential resignation, and he explained that he could no longer afford to pay *me*. Understanding the symbolic framework of the analysis was at risk through this reduction of

the setting to a monetary variable, I said that his first responsibility was to his analysis, not with *me*. This patient had first come to analysis after his father ran away from home, leaving him with the responsibility of taking care of his family. Abandoning analysis — as would have been the case if we'd reduced that process to a monetary transaction — would have reproduced his father's escape in a *resonance* (imaginary reproduction) with the president's escape.

Apart from my clinical work, teaching became a personal struggle against despair. What caught the attention of most assistant professors, including myself, was the students' difficulty in being able to communicate simple ideas and feelings about what was going on in our country at the end of 2001. In a *Popular Culture* course I was teaching, where all students except one were working women and heads of families, the students and I decided to try and address this difficulty. We altered the syllabus to include newspaper and magazine analyses of the crisis. And, instead of the classic final exam, this group of students organized an exhibition of their cultural and critical works and hosted a potluck party with traditional Argentinean food for students in other courses. I know that my colleagues, along with their students, engaged in similar activities, all offering elements of productive resistance to the oppressive circumstances. This is, as I see it, a powerful way of exemplifying how the subject position of difference is inscribed in daily life and everyday politics: subjects mobilized resources creatively against an ominous silence, and instead of competing for imaginary recognition (rivalry) within the space of the class, they engaged in projects which implied the psychical and social re-working of the conditions in which they were immersed.

As for my personal relationship with my family, the most significant aspect of December 2001 was "coming out" to my sister. For me, those protesters who *came out into* the streets to challenge their oppression by political elites created a metaphor for understanding my own "coming out." As dubious as I am, personally, about the stereotyped "coming out" act, I want to stress that it seemed I was not the only one for whom coming out into the streets in December 2001 served as a metaphor within which to discuss with our families the question of sexual identity. In a country like Argentina, marked by a profound and deeply held heterosexual, white, middle-class social imaginary, this coming out is particularly significant. In a certain way, many in Argentina were also *coming out*; they came out, albeit for different reasons, into the streets. As Kath Weston (1991) has shown, what could be understood as being redefined in these circumstances were not so much the biological ties to our families but, rather, our sense of kinship with them. It was a fertile re-positional or re-defining experience that challenged familiar meanings, values, experiences; and, it was an instance

of self-defined truth that broke the imaginary unity of many families for a moment. It may be that this characteristic of these instances—the idea that they constituted a moment of self-defined truth — marks them as crucially important in creating a unified familial front, even in the face of a broken imaginary unity. As Stuart Hall (1996a) has emphasized, just a moment of articulation of difference is enough to produce the potential of a social force capable of self-conscious unity in action.

Those who became political activists of everyday life, in different scenarios and in so many diverse forms, managed to transform something of December 2001 into an opportunity to speak out and meet others in communal participation; this quotidian political activism was a means of social expression, interpretation, participatory contestation, and subjective catharsis—all at the same time. These political activists were brave, powerful social voices that interrupted the political class’s silence, and created the conditions for the possibility to think differently and exercise power more humanely. This thinking and embodying difference is a movement from the space of imaginary reproduction (or sameness) to the space of the Symbolic.

Resistance was also visible in Argentina in the presence of what both Paulo Freire and Enrique Pichón-Riviére called “a project” (Quiroga, 2001). This project preserved the sanity of many of us. Beyond their presence in the streets, working families and individuals found ways to creatively and productively sustain themselves: they organized parallel food and goods markets based on the exchange of products; they coordinated neighborhood assemblies to discuss ways to take action and demonstrate resistance; and, they developed communal workshops, composed daily performances, and created agricultural enterprises. Heterogeneous as these working families’ movements might be, they share a certain quality that emerges from the momentary recognition of the Other as different. That quality is the difference that emerges from the potency of the symbolic order; it is the work of the word, and I elaborate on this point in the next, concluding section.

### **Final Remarks**

In December 2001, it was possible to believe for a while that the massive engagement of families and groups in the streets could unify peoples of diverse class, age, gender, political affiliations, and other particulars. Against sameness, we encountered difference and a diverse multiplicity of identities. Beyond the undeniable pain and suffering, what was a form of political struggle also became, at some moments, a popular celebration, a form of artistic performance in the street, a search for justice and joy, and a recoding of the past. In most cases, public mobilizations

were demonstrations lasting long hours and traversing several neighborhoods. As people joined together, their singing and banging of kitchen pots animated others to overcome the fear of engaging in such public events. Older generations were encouraged to take to the streets, too, and exorcize the memory of repression, persecution, and horror that characterized the years of the latest dictatorship; in doing so, they broke through years of ominous societal silence.

Borrowing from psychoanalytic theory for this article, I analyzed family complexes in order to provide a model of subjectivity that goes beyond *identity* and to stress the symbolic character of the human condition in allowing for a sort of identity politics beyond the rivalry represented in *telenovelas*. In so doing, I also demonstrated the usefulness of the psychoanalytic and cultural studies intersection. In that regard, and with respect to the Argentinean crisis, we can understand that relational rivalries are favored by the logic of late capitalism and one of its favorite gravitational centers: individual freedom to compete. Notice the paradox: for the individual to compete in this system, he/she has to trust in the existence of a *self*. But, this self is a sort of optical illusion. For the self, in this individualistic sense, to survive, it is driven to obliterate difference. However, as I've shown, some forms of social struggle, where the individual seems lost in the multitude, require, instead, a greater acknowledgement of difference. Acknowledging families as fundamental cultural complexes, as borders that can be crossed, and as double cultural phenomena producing subjectivity can help us understand the political dimension of this paradox.

The mobilization of families in the streets of Argentina in December 2001 acted against the ominous silence reflected in a mirror that does not speak. That is the mirror of rivalry. Against this mirror, the Symbolic (the dimension of the Universal) can be conceived of as the power to make difference. The creative, cultural re-ensembles of everyday life following December 2001, expressed various (and therefore Particular) ways in which groups contest a crisis. Finally, as the clinical vignette shows, the unique mode in which each subject processes and articulates these two dimensions offers a ground for the Singular act. Sociability, in this sense, implies going beyond narcissism and trusting that, even when subjects do not pursue exactly the same goals, they can put those desires into dialogue with one another because they share a symbolic universe.

I began this article with a question: how do we express the connection between our theories and our everyday politics? By examining Argentinean *telenovelas* and social movements, I have tried to answer this question. Theory without social commitment is academically imprudent. Instead, when theory is committed to question social orders,

it can become a practice of emancipation—like the one invoked by Martín-Baró—by offering unusual versions of history that oppose any coherent, imposed, self-regulated, or self-conscious version of who we are and what we do. If it is not true that there is *one* language, *one* memory, *one* culture, then it is also not true that there is one single version of the family. Understanding families' struggles in Argentina helps us to think the often unthinkable, *difference*, in a universe inhabited by plurals: cultures, languages, memories and, of course, others.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> During the 1976-1983 dictatorship in Argentina, about 30,000 people were illegally deprived of their liberty. Thousands have not reappeared to this day. According to *Argentinean National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons*, there are an unknown number of illegally appropriated children. Thanks to the work of *Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, almost two hundred of these cases have been registered so far.

<sup>2</sup> Cultural studies is defined here as a radical contextualized enterprise (Grossberg, 1997), that problematizes stable study objects by looking

critically into contemporary culture (During, 1993), by highlighting power relations and change in societies (Hall, 1996a), and by incorporating a reading of practices of contestation in everyday life. Cultural studies' emphasis on lived experience (Williams, 1994) has broken with dominant paradigms defining a self-reflexive field that re-locates theory within praxis.

<sup>3</sup> The word *psychical* differentiates here the psychoanalytic and the psychological conceptions on the human psyche.

<sup>4</sup> I use capital letters in this and other cases following Lacan's distinction between a Symbolic instance (Other), and an imaginary one (other).

<sup>5</sup> Guilt, in psychoanalytic terms, implies considerations about responsibility, which are outside the scope of this essay.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that these are subjective *positions* and not stable forms attainable by the self. They may coexist in one subject simultaneously, and so these positions should not be regarded as a progress of the self from a weaker to a stronger level of development.

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**Necessitating a Link  
Between Medium Theory and Semiotics:  
An Exploration in Understanding the Media Environment**

**Marc Leverette**

*Semiotics and medium theory have traditionally held oppositional views regarding concepts such as media, interpretation, and content. It will be argued that semiotics should maintain an active merger with medium theory and vice-versa, so that semioticians may gain a sense of technological effects and medium theorists a better appreciation for the interpretation of texts. A bridge linking these two theoretical arenas will allow for a more coherent and significantly holistic understanding of the media, both in McLuhan's sense of media as messages and semioticians view of messages framed within the media.*

Effective study of the media deals not only with the content of the media but with the media themselves and the total cultural environment within which the media function.

Marshall McLuhan, "The Playboy Interview" (54)

A structural approach to a medium means studying its total operation, the *milieu* that it creates—the environment.

Marshall McLuhan, "A Dialogue" (316)

What is needed is a better integration of medium theory with other perspectives.

Joshua Meyrowitz, "Medium Theory" (73)

**Introduction: The New Nature**

Todd Gitlin, writing about the media environment, or what he calls "the torrent," (or what McLuhan, at times, referred to as the "massage"), describes the problem of managing the unmanageable like this:

We are aware of its parts but oblivious of its huge place in our day-to-day lives. It is everywhere, too much to take in. It is, in a sense, like nature - that overwhelming presence human beings once found so threatening yet auspicious that they conjured up gods and demons to imagine their way through its ungraspable allness. (112)

Semioticians and medium theorists should be called to task to replace the “gods and demons” and contribute a course of navigation in a world where signification, mediation, and an interface with the hidden environment all add to the need for a more functional critical code with which to decipher reality.

Medium theorists need to incorporate semiotics into their paradigm to gain a respect for content and the overarching importance of meaning. And while medium theory needs semiotics to help better understand the signs of life, semioticians need medium theory in order to better understand the “allness” of our signified environment. “Cultivating and nourishing desires...” writes Gitlin, “everywhere [media] leave behind deposits of what only can be called a civilization - not an ideology, or a system of belief, but something less resistible, a way of life soaked in feeling, seeming to absorb with equal conviction traces of every idea, or for that matter, the absence of all ideas” (191). The “styles of navigation” need better navigators (see Gitlin Ch. 3).

The traditional concern of semioticians has been the meaning implicit within particular texts (see, for example, Danesi), whereas the main contributions of medium theorists deal with the impact of media or technologies on culture, consciousness, and the human sensorium.<sup>1</sup> A weakness of semiotics is often its inability to distinguish between implicit and explicit messages. Its intellectual (and hermeneutical) bias towards interpretation often leads to overinterpretation (see Eco et al. *Interpretation*). A weakness of medium theorists has been the tendency to trivialize content and dismiss the importance of meaning/message interpretation. The overarching problem that connects the two fields is semantics. Both intellectual frameworks are founded on notions and theories plagued by ambiguities, and are often turgid and contentious bodies of work that are, at times, myopic and circular. To correct these problems, it will be argued that semiotics should form and maintain an active merger with medium theory and vice-versa. Through clarification and synthesis, I will argue, semioticians will gain a sense of technological effects, as well as the importance of the medium when *reading* content on that medium. Alternatively, this will give medium theorists a better appreciation regarding the importance of the quest for meaning and the

driving need for dynamic interpretation of texts. I hope to show that medium theorists are actually followers of the tenets of semiotics.

Medium theorists regard media as “living vortices of power creating hidden environments (and effects) that act abrasively and destructively on older forms of culture” (McLuhan “Introduction” v). As such, media birth new social patterns and restructure human perception, cognition, and behavior. The history of media, from this perspective, has such an impressive scope that it draws upon the entire history of humanity. Mankind may be seen as having various epochs defined by the dominant form of communication.

In this way medium theorists *read* media, the form of dissemination, much the same way a semiotician would *interpret* the content of a media message. An obvious question might then be: how would a semiotician and a medium theorist read the same text? Meyrowitz’s (“Medium”) example of the Bible, I believe, shines some light on this question. Traditional exegesis of the Bible (from approaches such as semiotics or hermeneutics) would examine the text as religious doctrine and look for clues to deeper meaning, validity, and authorial intent. From an Innisian or McLuhanesque medium theory perspective, however, the Bible becomes a political tool. According to Meyrowitz (“Medium”):

Innis suggests that the medieval Church’s monopoly over religious information, and thereby over salvation, was broken by the printing press. The printing press by-passed the Church’s scribes and allowed for a wider availability of the Bible and other religious texts. The same content, the Bible, therefore, had different effects in different media. (51)

In the following sections, I will employ notable polemics of each field (concentrating on the work of Marshall McLuhan) to illustrate existing similarities and the necessity of a more practical bridge. Ultimately, this bridge will help theorists realize a more holistic approach to understanding the media environment.

## **Medium Theory and Media Ecology**

While semiotics has an intellectual history dating back to Charles Sanders Peirce’s semeiotic, Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiology,<sup>2</sup> and Giambattista Vico’s new science, medium theory is a relatively new approach in communication theory. It assumes that large, amalgamated technology presupposes a process of standardization, such as specific historical eras (oral, chirographic, print, and electronic) and relational “effects” on

consciousness (e.g. “print creates linearity”). The problem is that a deterministic reading of medium theory finds it assuming society to be nothing but a reverberation of the medium, and that social institutions and interactions are either nonexistent or subordinate. However, this is changing somewhat (for example, McLuhan’s medium theory did not take on a sociological context until Meyrowitz’s use of it). My concern, however, is not with social awareness, but rather with meaning. As a graduate student trying to find a correlation between medium theory and the immersion we maintain daily in what we ominously refer to as simply “the media,” I am concerned by medium theory’s negligence in regard to what the medium’s message actually may mean. Semiotics provides a way of reading a symbol/sign system that allows for connotative and denotative meanings, but at the same time it often ignores the form of the message and its role in altering consciousness and the social order. Medium theory, on the other hand, points to the changes brought about by symbol structures, but provides no clear explanation as to the importance of the messages conveyed. Joshua Meyrowitz, in *No Sense of Place*, describes the limitations of the focus on media content (see Ch. 2) and opts for an approach that bridges medium theory with the “situationism” of Erving Goffman and others.

According to Meyrowitz, in his essay “Medium Theory,” “Most of the questions that engage media researchers and popular observers of the media focus only on one dimension of our media environment: *the content of media messages*” (50, italics mine). The concern that this was not exhaustive of the questions that could, and should, be asked about the media led him to coin the term discussed herein. He writes:

A handful of scholars - mostly from fields other than communications, sociology, and psychology - have tried to call attention to the potential influences of communication technologies in addition to and apart from the content they convey. I use the singular “*medium theory*” to describe this research tradition in order to differentiate it from most other “*media theory.*” Medium theory focuses on the particular characteristics of each individual medium or of each particular type of media. (50, italics original; also *No Sense* 16 and “*Taking*” 79)

In this way, medium theorists argue that various factors influence the medium’s appropriation by a culture and its social, political, and psychological impact.

Due to this line of rationale, medium theory is often accused of preaching technological determinism, when in fact it is not. While media forms and structures are internalized and function as unacknowledged catalysts for change within the structure and conduct of thought and discourse, it is the *interaction* between media technology and human beings that is the subject of the medium theorist, and not the technology itself. The most apt metaphor is that of Neil Postman's "ecology," which best describes the complex interplay between human, technology, media, and the environment (see Postman, *Teaching*). Herein lays the complex concept of the media environment, which is firmly entrenched in Meyrowitz's perspective, most likely due to his training, under Postman, in Media Ecology at New York University in the late 1970s.

In its essence, media ecology looks at a culture in the biological sense of the word; it is a communication theory based on science and biology metaphors. In biology, if something new enters a culture, it changes the entire culture, not just the new thing itself. This is an underlying principle firmly rooted in systems theory and ecology. "When a new factor is added to an old environment," Meyrowitz notes, "we do not get the old environment plus the new factor, we get a new environment" (*No Sense* 19). This is to say, the environment is always more than simply the sum of its parts. This type of examination is the work of the ecologist, both traditional and media.

The term "media ecology" was first employed in November 1968, at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where Postman used the phrase in a major address for the purpose of suggesting a new direction for the teaching of English (published as "Reformed"). In coining the term, and subsequently the field of study, Postman pointed out that he was not inventing a non-existing discipline, but simply giving a name to the kinds of inquiries in which a number of scholars were already engaged.<sup>3</sup> He cites, as examples of practicing media ecologists: Lewis Mumford, Harold Innis, Peter Drucker, Jacques Ellul, Marshall McLuhan, Edmund Carpenter, David Reisman, Norbert Weiner, Ray Birdwhistell and several others (Postman "Reformed" 161). From this ecological framework, we can see that people today do not merely live in a world of the physical. The world is symbolic. We live in a reality filtered by various media; call it what you will: Plato's cave wall, the world outside and the pictures in our heads, mediated reality, second-hand world, the media environment, the media torrent.<sup>4</sup> As argued above, when a new technology or new symbol system enters a culture, the entire system will change. The examination of this phenomenon is the work of the media ecologist/medium theorist.

Because it takes an entire system to enable a medium to take effect, the charge of technological determinism doesn't stand. Technological determinism is a powerful view of the nature of social change, wherein new technologies are discovered serendipitously and then go about altering social change and progress. Progress, in this view, is the history of these inventions, thus history itself, foreseen and unseen, direct and indirect, is nothing more than the effects of these technologies. For example, the steam engine, the automobile, and television are makers of modern man and his condition (Williams 13). But in medium theory's ecological paradigm we can see that is not the case. For example, the printing press didn't take hold in China, but it did in Europe several centuries thereafter, for reasons involving the cultural milieu of the age. If a printing press were to end up in the middle of a Brazilian rain forest or an African jungle, it obviously wouldn't start churning out social change. In order to have an effect it would need to involve the system as a whole. Inspired by the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, Christine Nystrom refers to this line of thought as "coke bottle media ecology" (personal communication, April 4, 2002).

Ecology aside, it becomes increasingly clear that the hard-line medium theory stance is actually a structuralist point of view. That is to say, the examination concentrates on the *structure* of the symbol system (the medium) to understand the effects of its inherent grammar. Meyrowitz can then be seen as a structuralist, as can McLuhan and for a medium theorist such as McLuhan, content is directly relational to structure. For him, "content," is an illusion derived "from one medium being 'within' or simultaneous to another" (McLuhan and Parker *Counterblast* 24). This is to say that no medium of communication operates in isolation. McLuhan advanced three hypotheses observing how every medium affects every other medium.

The first, and most generalized, is that the "content" of a medium is always an older medium. Thus, the "content" of writing is speech, the "content" of print is writing, and so on. The second is that a new medium is always in competition with an older medium for the time, money, attention, and loyalty of the culture into which it is introduced. Part of the heated ferocity of this competition is the fight between allies of the older medium (print, say) and allies of the new (television, for example) wherein, as the preceding principle implies, what is at stake is not merely a technology/medium, but the entire lifestyle that the technology/medium implies. Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is an elegant example of a "typographic man" trying to come to grips with his place in a television world. The third principle is when a new technology/medium is introduced into a culture and usurps the function of an older technology/

medium. Either the older technology/medium will undergo some radical transformation and survive, or it will obsolesce and be preserved as an art form (I am thinking here, for example, of the commodification of handwriting (wedding invitations, etc.) in an age of fast and accessible word processing) (The preceding summary of McLuhan's major hypotheses was primarily derived from *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*). To return for a moment, though, to the idea of structuralism, we can observe that since different forms of communication have different ways of encoding reality, the structure (grammar, form) of any medium of communication is, in itself, a message which reveals a certain perception of reality.

This is basically what I take McLuhan to mean in his most well known aphorism, "the medium is the message." Luckily for us, and for the sake of clarity, Edmund Carpenter puts it somewhat less pithily, in "The New Languages:" "Each medium, if its bias is properly exploited," he writes, "communicates a unique aspect of reality, of truth. Each offers a different perspective, a way of seeing an otherwise hidden dimension of reality... A medium is not simply an envelope that carries any letter; it is itself a major part of that message" (Carpenter 174-6).

Accordingly in this view, it is the form of the medium, not the content of the message it carries, that dominates our organization of reality. The structure of the printed book, to take one of Carpenter's examples, presents a "reality" that has been divided into static units which can be analyzed individually. The structure of television, alternatively, presents a "reality" in which everything happens at once and events are difficult to isolate and analyze (Carpenter 162-6; see also, Nystrom).

## **McLuhan, Structuralism, and Semiotics**

But the role of structure is no mere coincidence in McLuhan; he considered himself a structuralist and rightly so. One of his primary influences, via James Joyce, was Giambattista Vico, who many see as the father of modern structural theory (see Hawkes).<sup>5</sup> In a 1969 letter, McLuhan remarked:

...Vico's new science was so important for [Joyce's] linguistic probes... Vico was the first to point out that a total history of human culture and sensibility is embedded in the changing structural forms of language. (*Letters* 385)

Structuralism, in its modern usage, is a European (primarily French) movement in humanities that conceives of any cultural phenomenon as

the product of a system of “signification” and attempts to identify a “grammar” of that culture, which could be seen as the rules by which meaning is communicated. By definition then, McLuhan was a structuralist. In a 1974 letter to historian and popular culture scholar Marshall Fishwick, McLuhan wrote, “...my approach is rightly regarded as ‘structuralist.’ I have acquired that approach through Joyce and Eliot and the Symbolists and use it in *The Mechanical Bride*. Nobody except myself in the media field has ventured to use the structuralist or ‘existential’ approach” (*Letters* 506).<sup>6</sup>

## **A Semiotic Reading of Medium Theory: Eco on McLuhan**

With this in mind, we may begin to see the connection between medium theorists and the work of semioticians. McLuhan’s thought, according to Arthur Kroker, was structural, analogical, and metaphorical because he sought to disclose the “semiological reduction” at work in media (63, see also, Baudrillard 89-95). But from within semiotics, we find one of McLuhan’s harshest critics.

Umberto Eco’s 1967 essay “Cogito Interuptus,” written largely in response to *Understanding Media*, reiterates the point that, for McLuhan, the medium makes irrelevant the content transmitted.<sup>7</sup> Taking into account the Guttenbergian habit of linearity, Eco insists readers must come to terms with McLuhan’s denied rationality:

McLuhan has recently realized that perhaps books must no longer be written; and with *The Medium is the Massage*, his latest “nonbook,” he suggests a discourse in which word is fused with image and the chain of logics are destroyed in favor of a synchronic, visual-verbal proposition, of unreasoned data set spinning before the reader’s intelligence. The trouble is that *The Medium is the Massage*, to be completely understood, needs *Understanding Media* as a code. (“Cogito” 231-2)<sup>8</sup>

But Eco, the “massage” having rubbed him the wrong way, misses a simple fact: the reason *Understanding Media* is required to truly break through the *Massage* is that the latter tome is actually nothing more than a collection of previously published works designed by Quentin Fiore and coordinated by Jerome Agel. I am reminded of what Michael Oakeshott once said: “There is an important distinction between a chemical process and a biochemist understanding and explaining what

is going on in a chemical process” (19). In a 1966 letter to William Jovanovich, then president of Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., McLuhan writes of *The Medium is the Massage*: “I didn’t write anything for that book. It is excerpts with pictures... it would be a boost for the other books” (*Letters* 339). Eco’s critique was seemingly McLuhan’s intent. In regard to the often misspelled and misquoted *massage* title, McLuhan noted the intent was to suggest that “a medium is not something neutral—it does something to people. It takes hold of them. It rubs them off, it massages them, it bumps them around” (from an hour-long NBC-TV program on McLuhan in March 1967, qtd. in *Letters* 340n5).

Another problem Eco has with McLuhan is his “games of definition.” “Here,” he writes, “we are still at the level of a deliberate regeneration of terminology for provocatory purposes (“Cogito” 233).” But this critique is nothing new. From McLuhan’s use of terms such as “hot,” “cool,” medium,” and so forth, it would appear an academic growth industry was born. (For example, how many times will we read: “What McLuhan really *meant* when he said was...” See Norvell Chs. 1 and 2 and Leverette “Semantic”). But Eco, a semiotician by trade, is concerned with meaning in the purest way. “Gutenberg man,” he notes, “and before him, alphabet man had at least taught us to define precisely the terms of our speech. To avoid defining them further precisely to ‘involve’ the reader further... is a trick to throw sand in our eyes” (“Cogito” 233). The drawback to McLuhan’s aphoristic, metaphorical style regarding media is that, for Eco, he seems to be confused as to what a metaphor, or a medium for that matter, actually is. He writes:

It is not true that - as McLuhan says - all the media are active metaphors because they have the power to transmit experience into new forms.<sup>9</sup> In fact, a medium translates experience because it represents a code... But the definition of medium as metaphor also covers a confusion in the definition of medium. To say that it represents an extension of our bodies still means little. (“Cogito” 233)

But a metaphor, by ancient definition, is a bridge, performing a kind of carry-over from one domain into another (see Gozzi 79). Within this function, media do qualify as metaphors, but it is the medium theorists’ misuse of meaning that often leads to semantic ambiguities such as these. For example, in a chapter titled “The Medium is the Metaphor,” Neil Postman writes: “Today, we must look to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a metaphor of our national character and aspirations” (*Amusing* 3). Moreover, he goes on to implicitly recognize the city (Las Vegas),

entertainment, and commercialism as the metaphors for his argument, not “the medium” as he proposes in his chapter title and in many overt declarations throughout the text (Flayhan 189).

To return to Eco, it is in McLuhan’s reasoning where the theoretician of communication finds trouble, “because the differences between the *channel* of communication, the *code* and the *message* are not established” (“Cogito” 233, italics original). Alas for Eco, however, McLuhan’s greatest sin is in his playful misuse of the term “content.” McLuhan often saw content as irrelevant, the juicy piece of meat the burglar brings to distract the guard dog, or simply an “illusion” that a medium can be in and simultaneous to another medium (McLuhan and Parker *Counterblast* 24). Also, particularly with sports, McLuhan saw the “audience” as content. He felt the activities must reflect the image of the audience, because the audience makes and uses games (see McLuhan and Nevitt 145-6 and Leverette *Professional* Ch. 3). For Eco, the receiver is not the content, but the central aspect of the communication process. It is in the receiver where interpretation occurs and meaning is bestowed. He writes: “The medium is *not* the message; the message becomes what the receiver makes of it, applying to it his own codes of reception, which are neither those of the sender nor those of the scholar of communications... the message depends on the reading given to it” (“Cogito” 235-6, italics original). Where McLuhan had four “laws of media,” the tetrad, Eco has but one: “I would say that variability of interpretation is the constant law of mass communications” (“Towards” 141).

## McLuhan as Semiotician

Interestingly enough, interpretation is where McLuhan began, starting his career as a literary critic. As a student of the New Criticism, the notion that a text is active and people receptive can be seen throughout his early work. I argue that a fatal flaw in medium theory is the tendency to denigrate the critiques of media into content criticism, this is particularly the case in the work of Neil Postman. To begin, we must, however, again look to McLuhan, whose early opus more closely resembles that of the semiotician than medium theorist.

In 1951, McLuhan published *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, a collection of fifty-nine concise essays on the sources and meanings of popular culture. Examining comic strips, advertisements, and other promotional imagery of the American press (with playfully chosen illustrations to boot), he writes, “Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best trained individual minds have made it a full

time business to get inside the collective public mind... bringing about this condition of public helplessness” (*Mechanical v*). But because of McLuhan’s later medium-centric oeuvre, I feel this text is too often ignored. *The Mechanical Bride* should stand as a deserving North American counterpart to Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*.<sup>10</sup>

## **Barthes, Myth, and Media**

Regarding the masterwork of the master scientist of the sign, John Storey notes, “*Mythologies* represents the most significant attempt to bring the methodology of semiology to bear on popular culture” (77). In the theoretical essay that concludes the collection, “Myth Today,” Barthes outlines the theoretical assumptions that informed the proceeding essays. He presents a semiotic (Barthes uses “semiological”) model for reading popular culture, essentially adding a second level to de Saussure’s schema of signifier + signified = sign. A few years later, in *Elements of Semiology*, Barthes clarifies the model with the addition of the more familiar terms of denotation and connotation. Denotation is an object’s primary signification and connotation, then, is the secondary signification. He writes: “the first system [denotation] becomes the plane of expression or signifier of the second system [connotation]... The signifiers of connotation... are made up of the signs (signifiers and signified united) of the denotated system” (*Elements* 89-91). This is how medium theorists can use semiotics, for they do, in fact, use content by *reading* (in the semiotic sense of the word) both medium and media environment as a text and face the problem of trying to avoid the obvious (content). The media (as institutions) provide content, not so it can be avoided, but with the express and ostensible purpose of being seen, heard, read, etc.<sup>11</sup>

## **Media as Environment**

In *Counterblast*, McLuhan notes, “Media effects are new environments as imperceptible as water is to a fish, subliminal for the most part” (McLuhan and Parker *Counterblast* 22). Running with this metaphor, he wrote in 1970’s *Culture is Our Business*, “Fish don’t know water exists till beached” (191). If, for the most part, the technological environment is invisible to its inhabitants, as McLuhan would say, whoever actually discovered the water we know wasn’t a fish - by which we mean that we are least likely to notice those aspects of our surroundings in which we are most deeply immersed (Nystrom 110). This is what Todd Gitlin refers to as “the torrent” washing over us with an infinite glimmer feeding us

disposable feelings only to fade back into the rhythmic twitch of the unceasing flow. In *Media Unlimited*, he too takes up the discrepancy of McLuhan's "glib formulation:" "the medium is the message." He writes, "Media do not simply deliver information," continuing:

An image or a soundtrack is not simply a set of abstract signs that describe, point to, or represent realities standing elsewhere. Not only do they point; they are. They are wraparound presences with which we live much of our lives. McLuhan was closer to the truth when, in a playful mood, he titled one of his later books *The Medium is the Massage*. (9, italics original)

Though his concern is media as institutions and as a way of life, rather than as technology, the connection between environment and torrent is clear. Gitlin again:

Media are occasions for experiences - experiences which are themselves the main products, the main transactions, the main "effects" of media. This is the big story; the rest is details. (9)

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...the wonder of communications was that the carriers of information did not simply transmit facts or ideology. They occasioned a human experience - a sense of connection to the world. (47)

It is, in fact, our entire world as we know it.

The notion that there is a hidden environment has so permeated modern discourse that we find the metaphor seeping into other fields. In political science, Benjamin Barber's capitalist McWorld is a new kind of chilly "virtual reality, created by invisible but omnipotent high-tech information networks and fluid transnational economic markets..." (26). I won't attempt a discussion of "the global village" metaphor here, but in Barber's case, "global mall" may be more applicable.

To segue back into McLuhan, we can see the importance of the conceptual environment in attempting to grapple with media. He described it as, among other things: an "active process" (*Understanding vi*), "formed by our new technologies," and "imperceptible in its initial reign" ("Guaranteed" 200), processes and not containers ("Information"

199), either visible or invisible (an invisible environment is fragmentary and significant, a visible environment is saturating and visible: an environment is a process and not a container) (“Technology” 5), always being invisible, degrading, and a process (McLuhan and Parker *Counterblast* 30), relying upon all the components in a situation [ecology], and acting as a process (McLuhan and Parker *Vanishing* 242), changing us (McLuhan and Nevitt 90). Since the environment is in constant flux, much like the torrent overwhelming us, the message is more apropos than is the *message*.

In an early essay in his medium-focused epoch, 1955’s “A Historical Approach to the Media,” McLuhan observed that we were fast becoming passive victims, “helpless illiterates,” in the new changing world of technology as the “media themselves act directly toward shaping our most intimate self-consciousness” (110). Nine years later he wrote:

Over and over I’ve talked to groups and individuals about new technology as new environment. Content of new environment is old environment. The new environment is always invisible. Only the content *shows*, and yet only the environment is really *active* as shaping force. (*Letters* 311, also see the related discussion in McLuhan “Relation”)

Here then, is McLuhan-medium theorist, functionally acting as McLuhan-semiotician, reading the environment as text, extrapolating and illustrating both connotative and denotative levels of meaning. This act of interpreting the media environment is an important step towards uniting semiotic analysis and medium theory. If we can approach the environment from this two-prong strategy, we will further ourselves in comprehending its “effects,” “messages,” and “massage.”

What McLuhan meant when he wrote “the medium is the massage” (and yes I do see the irony here, but these are his words, not mine) was that a medium is a complex and effective “set of events” which change our outlook and the posture of entire groups of people (McLuhan “Change-Overs” 114). Like Poe’s sailor caught in the maelstrom, McLuhan insisted that we cannot understand the technological experience from the outside. We can only comprehend our situation once we’ve realized how the electronic age “works us over.”

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. (McLuhan and Fiore 26)

As Arthur Kroker points out, in *Technology and the Canadian Mind*, “When McLuhan noted in *Counterblast* that ‘environment is process, not container,’ [p.30] he meant just this: the effect of all new technologies is to impose, silently and pervasively, their deep assumptions upon the psyche...” (56). Therefore the process that is our environment massages us into reworking our “ratio of senses.” It is from within the media environment that a merger between interpretive semiotics and medium theory becomes a necessity, as McLuhan once said: He, Innis, and other explorers of media environments are like blind men tapping canes in the dark (Meyrowitz *No Sense* 343 n19).

### **Conclusion: Necessitating a Link**

Among strands in the debate surrounding the theoretical approach to media, nowhere is the division line more visible than in the argument between form and content, medium and message. The two fields have traditionally held oppositional views regarding concepts such as media/medium, content, and interpretation. The purpose here has been to illustrate the need to build a bridge between these two worlds. As Joshua Meyrowitz notes, “medium theory is most helpful when it is used... to add another dimension to our understanding of the media environment” (“Medium Theory” 73). A bridge linking these two theoretical structures will allow for a more coherent and holistic understanding of the media, both in Marshall McLuhan’s sense of media as messages and semioticians’ views of messages framed within the media.<sup>12</sup>

Before we can grasp at media’s enveloping “allness,” as described by Gitlin, we need clarification over our understanding, agreement on what we mean when we say “mean,” and a structural approach that will never simply be content with content. Delivery is but one aspect of media’s contact with human existence; to deny messages entirely is to deny the importance of society. The semantic ambiguities of both McLuhan’s medium theory and semiotics require “demystification,” not only of the theories alone, but regarding the environment itself if we are to even begin to conceptualize the tremendous Joycean divine thunderclap that is the totality of our modern life with media.

Or perhaps (but let’s hope not), the axioms of some deconstructionists are correct: every reading is a misreading, all interpretation is misinterpretation, and since meaning is indeterminate, understanding is impossible (though, for illustrative purposes, this may well be a clear misreading of deconstruction).

May those aforementioned gods and demons help us imagine our way.

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## Author

Marc Leverette (MA, New York University, 2002) is completing his doctorate in media studies at Rutgers University. His dissertation is an “archeology” of medium theory and a Marxian critique of its political economy. He is the author of *Professional Wrestling, the Myth, the Mat, and American Popular Culture* and the forthcoming *The Highway is Alive Tonight: Cultural Resistance in American Music*, as well as a number of articles. He is currently co-editing a collection of cultural studies of the zombie.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The work of Peirce, it should be noted, does provide a powerful theoretical framework through which we can consider the form of messages and their altering consciousness and the social order (see Merrell). I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer at *Kaleidoscope* for pointing me towards this distinction.

<sup>2</sup> While most of the discussion surrounding the genealogy of semiotics deals with the serendipitous creation of the “science of signs” on both side of the Atlantic, I tend to agree with Gérard Deledalle in that, historically, Peirce’s developments take priority over Saussure’s, one of the reasons I use “semiotic” as opposed to “semiology.” For example, while he was a pioneer in many disparate fields, Peirce elaborated upon his theory of signs throughout his life. On the other hand, Saussure’s main thesis on a theory of the sign is actually a collection of posthumously published lecture notes taken by his students, and the idea was far from being his main research interest, Saturnian verse. Also, Saussure’s “semiology” finds its a priori thinking within the framework of contemporary thought and was a linguistic approach. Peirce’s “semeiotic,” conversely, is essentially a philosophical approach, as opposed to linguistic, having pragmatic, phaneroscopic, and logical aspects. Lastly, there is the simple chronology of the suggestions: Since we don’t have the theory in Saussure’s own words, we do however know that he gave his famous second course in general linguistics in 1908-1909 (but possibly had the idea before 1901). Unknown to Saussure, his call for a science that “studies the life of signs” had actually been anticipated by Peirce,

who gave a first version of it in 1867 and 1868 and continued to develop it to the end of his life in 1914. For the above comparison, I am indebted to Deledalle and his essays in comparative semiotics which elaborate on the two theorists.

<sup>3</sup> Postman cites that these studies “date back to Lewis Mumford, in 1945” (though the text in question was actually written in 1934), but Socrates, in fact, speculated, rather gloomily, on the effects of writing on culture roughly 2400 years before Innis, McLuhan, or Mumford appeared on the scene. There are several significant passages in Plato’s *Phaedrus* which express Socrates’ hostility towards the written word. See also, Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*. To his credit, Postman does use the tale of Thamus quite brilliantly to introduce his argument in *Technopoly*.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Republic* of Plato, Book 7; Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion*; Michael R. Real, “Cultural Studies and Mediated Reality;” C. Wright Mills, “The Cultural Apparatus,” and Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited*.

<sup>5</sup> Giovanni Battista (Giambattista) Vico’s (1688-1744) most widely known works are *La Scienza Nuova* (New Science), published in 1725, and *La Scienza Nuova Seconda* (1730, 1744). Interestingly, it should be noted, the complete title of McLuhan’s last full-length work, posthumously finished and published by his son, is *Laws of Media: The New Science*. See Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science*.

<sup>6</sup> It should also be noted that McLuhan, publicly in 1959, flatly and summarily rejected structuralism, dismissing de Saussure as irrelevant to his project. It wasn’t until 1974 that McLuhan actually read Saussure. In fact, throughout the 1960s, McLuhan had virtually no knowledge of contemporary French theory (see Theall 111-12).

<sup>7</sup> See *Understanding Media*, Chapter 31, “The Timid Giant,” in which McLuhan makes it abundantly clear that involvement with television has absolutely nothing to do with the content of television messages; the quality of the program is irrelevant. See also Umberto Eco, “Cogito Intereptus,” p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> In regard to Eco’s use of the term “code,” see his “Towards a Semiological Guerilla Warfare,” wherein he re-envisioned Shannon and Weaver’s model of communication to take into account medium and code, p. 138. See also, Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore (produced by Jerome Agel), *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* or the CBS LP recording of the same year.

<sup>9</sup> McLuhan, it should be noted, thought all media were their own myths as well.

<sup>10</sup> See, Genosko, for an excellent discussion of these two works in the context of France in the mid-1960s.

<sup>11</sup> If then, the basic flaw in the critique of media form is its natural tendency to fall back on content, readings in the medium theory canon would surely reflect this deficiency. One example is the aforementioned Neil Postman. While he does attempt to contribute to our understanding of media's role in daily life, a quick perusal through one of his most celebrated texts, *Amusing Ourselves to death*, will reveal that even Postman cannot escape medium theory's trap, the tendency to focus on content rather than form. For the exceedingly harsh, but not unwarranted, critique of Postman, see Flayhan's *Marxism, Medium Theory, and American Cultural Studies: The Question of Determinism*.

<sup>12</sup> There are at least two comparative studies that, to some extent, deal with this approach to medium theory and semiotics that are worth noting here. Though, they each deal more explicitly with contrasting the views of McLuhan and Charles Sanders Peirce. For more see the work of Deledalle and Esté.

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## ***In Nomine Patri et Fili***

**Alice Filmer**

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*This performance text is a personal narrative tracing major aspects of the author's cognitive and affective process in coming to terms with the deaths of her brother and her father. Based on her lived experience as a child growing up Catholic in an alcoholic family system with a legacy of incest, the narrative captures the emotional and psychic trauma faced by children and adults who have been violated in their most intimate relationships. This history is highly personal and at the same time widely applicable in its potential to explain heretofore immutable states of conflict between various groups of people in which past and present injuries and injustice remain fixed within black and white frames of analysis.*

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***Swing low, sweet chariot  
comin' for to carry me home  
Swing low, sweet chariot  
comin' for to carry me home***

Three months before the Berlin Wall fell, my brother Chris fell. To his death, off a cliff, behind the wheel of his Volkswagen van, alone. For a few seasons, I felt inclined to fall down after him, until I regained my balance. Ten and a half years later, my father fell. Into a coma, on his living room floor, under the spell of valium and alcohol, alone for two days. Shortly thereafter, he slid. Into his death, on a hospital bed, in a state of impaired yet decisive consciousness, in the presence of people who loved him. It's been a long spell of these fatal spills in my family.

The gravity of self-sabotage among my kin is a force I've reckoned with for as long as I can remember. It pulls at me constantly, beckoning me to declare my allegiance, my loyalty in kind. Though I have walked right up to the edge and stared into the abyss, I am unwilling to step over that threshold. My displays of solidarity with what has become a recurring, familiar theme are confined to episodic spells of depression. I decline this rite of passage at grave risk to my sense of belonging. After all, how

will I know—how will my *people* know—that I am one of them if I should die an untraumatic death in my old age?

*I looked over Jordan, and what did I see?  
comin' for to carry me home  
A band of angels comin' after me  
comin' for to carry me home*

*Summer 1965*

I'm nine years old. It's Saturday morning and my mother sighs deeply as she makes out the check for our groceries at the Safeway supermarket. She worries about a lot of things. Like money in her bank account. Like droughts in northern California. Like whether my father's driving while drunk right now. Or doing something else he shouldn't be doing. She smokes 25-cent packs of L&M cigarettes to calm her nerves.

*Where are you, Daddy? It's been one week since our last conversation.*

Me, I'm full of worries, too. Like when's the next time I'm gonna get beaten on by my two strong brothers. Like what people think about my family. Like cleaning up after my dad's latest binge so my mom won't have to do it again. I feel better when I help her carry this load. She calls me her angel. But angels don't drink coffee and bite their nails constantly. At least I don't think so.

It's Saturday afternoon and I've pedaled my 3-speed, black-and-white Raleigh bike to St. Anselm's church, hoping Father Burns will forgive me for my sins once again. I wait in line for his confessional where I deliver the same list of overblown transgressions each week. He sits on the illuminated side of the compartment. I kneel in the dark behind the opaque screen that divides us. Does he know it's me?

*Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been one week since my last confession.*

*These are my sins: I have lied, I have sworn, and I have disobeyed my parents.*

*Please forgive me for these and all my sins.*

He mumbles something in Latin while his hand makes the sign of the cross in mid-air.

*In nomine patri, et fili, et spiritui sancti. Amen.*

With his blessing, I feel the burden of my sins lifted and head straight to the altar at the front of the church. Beside the rows of flickering candles, I get down on my knees once again in the dim light and say my regular penance of ten Hail Marys and ten Our Fathers.

*Our Father who art in . . .*

*Daddy, where are you? I know you aren't in heaven.*

Crossing myself with holy water on the way out of church is all I can do to protect my soul from another perilous week of life ahead. In a world that's mined with venial and mortal sins just waiting to be stepped on, I know I have to keep on my toes to limit the damage. Full of original sin, I have no unrealistic ideas about having come from some state of innocence. That's just completely off the edges of my map. Besides, I'm too busy looking down to have a chance to look out at the horizon.

*Swing low, sweet chariot  
comin' for to carry me home  
Swing low, sweet chariot  
comin' for to carry me home*

*Summer 1989*

It's Sunday afternoon. I've been playing the dulcimer and singing Appalachian folk songs with my little son and my brother Chris. We love making up new words to old songs. I know Chris is in trouble because he's begun saying things that don't make any sense. He admits he's been dropping acid recently while sorting through incest memories. This is a really bad idea, I tell him. Will he please stop doing that and get back into therapy? No, he doesn't trust therapists and doctors any more. He stands on the porch of my front doorway getting ready to leave. I don't know yet that I'm seeing him for the last time. Stricken with horror, I look up from my feet upon hearing his explanation for why he was abused as a child. Chris is full of theories.

*"Alice, I never realized how much Mom and Dad hated me."*

In a split second, I see Chris inside of the abyss. How can my brilliant and beloved brother—a 35 year-old artist, gardener, and libertarian

communist who has fought for social justice the majority of his life—possibly come to this conclusion?

*“That’s got nothing to do with it!” I shout. “They didn’t hate you, Chris! They were FUCKED UP!!!!!!”*

My words fall loudly to the bottom of that deep, dark pit he’s in and remain there. They cannot pull him out of this extreme distress. He needs a kind of lifeline that I don’t have. In total anguish, I watch him go down the steps. Powerlessness floods my senses.

*Bless me, Father, for I have sinned . . . no . . . Bless us, Father, for our father has sinned. It has been 20 years since my last confession. I am so so so s-a-d. I want my brother back. It should’ve been Dad, not Chris. Bless you, Chris.*

***Well if you get to heaven before I do  
comin’ for to carry me home  
Tell all my friends I’m comin’ too  
comin’ for to carry me home***

*Autumn 1989*

I’m not speaking to my father now. Any communication between us is either in writing or mediated by a therapist. I hate him too much for what he did when we were kids, even though that was more than 25 years ago. I blame him for my brother’s death. I’m angry at my mother, too, for not having protected us. I’m pissed off at just about everything and I’m trying to get to the bottom of all this. I’m full of questions. Like, why would someone who you needed and wanted to trust the most betray you in the worst kind of way? Like, how did my brother come to see himself as the hated one, and not as the victimized and innocent child that he was? I know our parents didn’t hate any of us; in fact, I’m quite sure they loved us despite their failings. But what does love mean? What a mind fuck it is trying to come to terms with a reality where love and abuse came packaged together in the same physical forms. It’s so seductive to want to think in black and white terms. But they don’t fit this reality. I’m low on answers. And my puzzler is sore.

*Autumn 1992*

*Bless you, father, for you have sinned. It's been ages since our last conversation.*

*500 Years of Resistance*

*I feel like I've been strip-mined  
raped of some of my precious ore  
ripped off, not even paid  
like a whore—*

*My daddy was a miner  
he said, "your body is mine, mine, mine"  
but you know something, daddy  
you committed a crime*

*When Columbus finally anchored here  
he said, "this land is mine, mine, mine"  
and native people they been ripped off  
ever since that time—  
This flesh that I live in  
this land that I dwell upon  
each one like the other  
is sacred ground—*

*Come gather 'round, spirits  
wherever you roam—  
and cherish your body  
it is your home—  
and cherish this land  
it is our home—*

*The child belongs to no one  
she's entrusted to our care  
and the earth belongs to no one  
her bounty's meant to be shared  
we are the guardians of this garden  
so rare—*

### *Winter 1993*

Lately, I'm full of theories. Like what original sin really is. Like how Chris must've made sense of his early experiences. As the target of hatred, at least he mattered for something, he counted. Better to be the villain in a scene than to play the part of an innocent, but invisible, bystander. The former role offers a higher profile, commands respect as a worthy adversary, and inspires a strong emotional response in everyone party to the action. The latter player really doesn't matter in the end. No one remembers him. What an existential dilemma for a four-year-old to wrap his mind around. In the absence of anything else to grab hold of, I think Chris tried to avoid feeling like an impotent conscript by resourcefully scripting himself into the tragedy as a central character. He chose the illusion of negative power over the experience of innocent powerlessness as a way to survive in his head. I say that 'cuz I know all too well that unbearable feeling of having no control in a really bad situation. I recognize in myself the tendency—similar to my brother's—of assigning meaning to insanity. It used to work for me. Now I want out.

### *Spring 1994*

My father and I have agreed to disagree about certain events of the past. He doesn't recall many of the things that the rest of us do. That's the surreality of alcoholic blackouts. When I recount my version of what happened, he's genuinely and appropriately horrified. But I might as well be talking about somebody else. He simply can't identify himself with the perpetrator of those deeds. I can imagine how difficult that would be. My dad is, by nature, a very gentle soul. The last thing he would want to do is hurt his children. All the same, it did happen. How long do I hold onto this pain? The abuse ended a long time ago, but his unconditional love for us never has. I don't want to forget what happened, but I do want to move on with my life. Can I learn to inhabit a Both-And reality and let go of the familiar world of Either-Or? I'm trying to decenter myself from the position of yet another righteously aggrieved protagonist in our family drama and move toward the identity of a compassionate deviant among my people. I reserve the right to live and die in peace.

*Forgive me, whoever, for having chosen as a child the only expression of protest available to a little girl trapped in the double-bind of obedience to her elders and honesty to her Self. I think this is what original sin must be.*

Winter 2000

I'm 44 years old. It's the middle of the afternoon on Thursday. My father is dying. I lie down on the bed beside him, hold him in my arms, and sing to him for the last time.

*Bless you, Dad. Amen.*

*Swing low, sweet chariot  
comin' for to carry me home  
Swing low, sweet chariot  
comin' for to carry me home*

*If you get to heaven before I do  
comin' for to carry me home  
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too  
comin' for to carry me home*

*Swing low, sweet chariot  
comin' for to carry me home  
Swing low, sweet chariot  
comin' for to carry me home*

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## **Author**

Alice Filmer is a doctoral student in the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests lie at the intersection of language, identity, and power. In addition to her emphasis on issues of linguistic and cultural diversity in borderlands/contact zones, she also examines how linguistic interpretations (i.e., framing) of lived experiences can reify cognitive-affective states ranging from disenfranchised impotence to empowered agency.

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## **Revisiting the 1966 Model Minority Myth: A Narrative Criticism of its Textual Origins**

**Yuko Kawai**

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*Two articles published in New York Times Magazine and U.S. News and World Report in 1966 launched the construction of the model minority myth. Using Fisher's narrative paradigm, this essay offers an analysis of these two articles in order to understand the worldview that the texts attempt to produce and examine the resilience of the model minority myth. The author argues that the model minority myth is pervasive because it is not just a stereotype of Asian Americans; it is a racial and political discourse that not only promotes a particular view about race relations, but also resonates with the Horatio Alger myth (or the myth of the American Dream), which is deeply rooted in White America's most influential ideology: (neo)liberalism/individualism.*

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In the middle of the 1960s, during the latter stages of the Civil Rights movement in which African Americans and other racial minority groups were fighting against racism, a new stereotypical image of Asian Americans—the model minority—emerged. Prior to the 60s, Asians in the United States were represented as undesirable aliens who polluted the white land of the United States, coolies who took away Americans' jobs by working for low wages, and the embodiment of the yellow peril (Lee, 1999). Two articles, published in 1966 by the mainstream media, are viewed by some as being responsible for the construction of the model minority myth of Asian Americans (Lee, 1999; Zia, 2000). On January 9, an article titled, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style" appeared in *New York Times Magazine*. On December 26, *U.S. News and World Report* published a similar article, "Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.," this time focusing on Chinese Americans. The articles celebrated Asian Americans as the model minority group who successfully raised their socio-economic status in U.S. society despite their non-White racial background. Since 1966, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Fortune*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other mainstream media have included and

featured other Asian Americans, such as Koreans, Vietnamese, and Asian Indians as the model minority (Osajima, 2000; Wu, 2002). The articles typically state that Asian Americans exceed White Americans in academic performance, achieve an income level equivalent to or higher than White Americans, and, generally, realize a higher socio-economic status in the United States.

The model minority myth is one of the most prevalent stories about Asian Americans today. Wu (2002) is “fascinated by the imperviousness of the model minority myth against all efforts at debunking it” (p. 40). Gotanda (1995) contends that it is difficult to “situate this racial category [Asian American] without succumbing to the ‘model minority’ stereotype” (p. 98). In the context of current thoughts about the myth, it is useful to return to the first two texts of the model minority myth. A return to these texts offers an opportunity to explore the tenaciousness of the narrative in the intertwined context of the rise of current forms of globalization, powerful neo-liberals, and affirmative action opponents who have enjoyed recent successes in overturning this legal protection in various states. The elimination of affirmative action programs in California, Texas, Florida, and Washington has occurred within the last several years (Steinberg, 2003, June 24). Neo-liberalism as “the theoretical underpinning logic of the most recent wave of globalization” (Fitzsimons, 2000, p. 506) backs the argument of the anti-affirmative action camp by offering an individualistic and abstracted view of people and society.

In this essay, following Fisher’s (1984; 1985) narrative paradigm, I analyze the two articles published in *New York Times Magazine* and *U.S. News and World Report* in 1966. Recognizing them as constituting a narrative of the model minority myth, I examine them in order to understand the worldview that the texts attempt to produce and to explore the resilience of the model minority myth. Ultimately, I argue that the model minority myth is pervasive because it is not just a stereotype of Asian Americans; it is a racial and political discourse that not only promotes a particular view about race relations, but also resonates with the Horatio Alger myth (or the myth of the American Dream), which is deep-rooted in White America’s most influential ideology: (neo)liberalism/individualism. The titles of both articles—“Success Story, Japanese-American Style” and “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.”—use the word *story*, which indicates that both articles embrace a narrative form. Fisher’s narrative paradigm offers a useful way to examine the model minority myth represented in the two articles because the articles, through telling a particular *story* or narrative about Asian Americans and other racial groups, also present a *story* about U.S. society.

## **The Model Minority Myth and Colorblind Ideology**

Asian American scholars have criticized the model minority myth because it is an over-simplification and does not tell a story that resonates with lived reality (e.g., Osajima, 2000; Wu, 2002). Lived reality is often very different than the representations constructed by the myth. Although Asian Americans are reputed to earn higher incomes, this phenomenon can be attributed partly to the fact that the Asian American population is concentrated in particular states and metropolitan areas in which living expenses are relatively higher than in other areas, and incomes coincide with living expenses. In addition, Asian Americans do not constitute a heterogeneous group, as the myth would have us believe; a serious income gap exists among various groups of Asian Americans. For example, people who came to the United States recently as refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos live below the poverty line in far greater percentages than the general U.S. population (Wang & Wu, 1996). Moreover, the educational level of Asian Americans may be higher than other minority groups, but, in comparison with White Americans at an equal educational level, Asian Americans actually earn less money (Wu, 2002).

The model minority myth is a racially and, thus, politically motivated discourse that involves all racial groups. It was not an accident that the mainstream media published the two articles representing Asian Americans as the model minority in the middle of the 60s (Wu, 2002). The Civil Rights Movement, initiated by African Americans, mobilized other minority groups and they demanded equal treatment under United States law, regardless of race and ethnicity. The Black Power Movement, claiming that “America was fundamentally a racist society” (Osajima, 2000, p. 451), demanded structural changes in U.S. society, and can be understood as more “radical” than the Civil Rights Movement. The model minority myth was a political message that can be viewed as targeting and challenging the message of the Black Power Movement (Osajima, 2000). By “uplifting” Asian Americans as the model minority who were able to move ahead despite their racial background, the myth undermined the argument of the Black Power Movement.

Critical race theory provides another useful theoretical lens to understand the model minority myth as a racial and political discourse. Critical race theorists argue that colorblind ideology conceals actual racial inequality by promoting formal equality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Colorblindness abstracts individuals from social and historical contexts and attributes the consequences of racial inequality to individual underperformance, rather than acknowledging institutional racism

(Guinier & Torres, 2002). The term “colorblind” was first used in 1896 in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in which U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harlan opposed the “separate but equal” doctrine and stated that “our constitution is color-blind....In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law” (quoted in Wu, 2002, p. 146). Harlan’s statement was meaningful at a time when people of color were officially segregated and suffered discrimination. Yet, the idea of colorblindness in the post-Civil Rights Movement era has been appropriated by conservatives and has served to rhetorically disguise “fundamentally racial claims” (Kim, 1999, p. 117). Critical race theorists challenge the concept of race as a formal and neutral category and, at the same time, advocate understanding the importance of race. They recognize that avoiding or ignoring talk about race as a political and economic category does not lead to a racism-free society but, instead, elides the existence of institutional racism (Guinier & Torres, 2002).

Colorblind discourse is also closely related to (neo)liberalist ideologies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Classical liberalism—articulated by, for instance, Smith, Ricardo, Bentham, and the two Mills—assumes that a civil society is neutral and consists of atomistic and rational individuals who pursue their interests freely (Conway, 1995). Neo-liberalism, an ideology that gained prominence in the 1990s along with the current forms of globalization, promotes “free, unregulated markets coupled with aggressive individualism” (Wells, Carnochan, Slayton, Allen, & Vasudeva, 1998, p. 324). The acceleration of individualism backed by neo-liberalism has intensified colorblindness. Like neo-liberalism/individualism, colorblind ideology as a racial/political discourse denies institutional racism by detaching people and their situations from relevant historical, economic, political, and social contexts. By doing so, racial inequality is framed as a problem to be blamed on members of racial minority groups rather than understanding the significant role that White Americans and institutions play in the process of that inequality.

The model minority myth exemplifies a “stock story” (Guinier & Torres, 2002, p. 35) of colorblindness. Numerous individual stock stories of colorblindness constitute and are constituted by colorblind discourse. It is not colorblind ideology that people directly hear or read. Rather, people are exposed to the stock stories of colorblindness found mainly in mainstream mass media, and it is the stock stories that help constitute the ideology. The model minority myth is a particular story about Asian Americans, who are the main characters. At the same time, the myth offers a worldview that embraces and promotes the ideas that race does not matter, that racial minority groups can advance if they only make the

effort, and that, if they are not succeeding, it is their problem. Understanding the 1966 model minority myth articles can provide insights into how colorblind ideology is realized in the myth under current contexts and how it can be challenged.

### **The Model Minority Myth as Narrative**

Fisher (1984) defines human beings as *homo narrans* and the world as comprised of sets of stories. Narratives refer to “symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them” (Fisher, 1984, p. 2). Fisher’s narrative paradigm assumes, ontologically and epistemologically, that human beings make the best sense of their world through stories. Moreover, human communication *itself* can be regarded as narrative because what we communicate, regardless of its individual form, is always already storied; at the same time, stories are the way we know and come to understand that world we constitute (Fisher, 1984; 1985).

Although Fisher (1984) contends that human communication should be viewed “as being rational when they [stories] satisfy the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity” thus also serving “inevitably [as] moral inducements” (p. 2), narrative rationality alone does not always warrant just and moral judgments. Warnick (1987) critically examines Fisher’s narrative paradigm and claims that narrative rationality does not always lead us to the just and the true: “a rhetorical narrative may ‘ring true’ in the lives of particular audience members, may resonate with their own experience and that of those whom they admire, and nevertheless be a bad [narratively irrational] story” (p. 179). As storytelling humans, we tend to be persuaded by “good” stories—regardless of their implications—when the stories seem to correspond to our own values and beliefs. Stories, then, whether “good” or “bad,” can have effects that, simultaneously, are oppressive for some while confirming of others’ values and worldviews.

I analyze the two 1966 model minority myth articles by focusing on the characters in order to understand first, what kind of worldview the articles are trying to construct and second, why the model minority myth still “rings true” in U.S. society. Stories are narrators’ interpretations of the world and, thus, reveal their worldviews (Foss, 1996). The two model minority myth articles, which help constitute broader racial and political discourses, demonstrate how race relations among different racial groups are storied as character relations. Paying attention to character relations in my analysis does not mean that I ignore other narrative dimensions, however. For instance, contextual considerations are indispensable for

analyzing characters and their relations. The following analysis, then, includes consideration of various settings in which characters appear or in which action occurs. Moreover, narrative elements are not always discrete, but can overlap with each other. In former U.S. President Reagan's narrative, for instance, the audience (Americans) is also a central character, and the narrator (Reagan) also appears simultaneously as a character (Lewis, 1987). This simultaneity is also taken into consideration in the following analysis.

### **Analysis**

The first article, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," was written by William Petersen, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley and was published in *New York Times Magazine* on January 9, 1966. This eight-page article focused on Japanese Americans and represented their past and present experiences in the United States. The second article, "Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.," did not include an author's name; it appeared on December 26, 1966, in *U.S. News and World Report*. This three-page article's focus was on how well Chinese Americans were doing without having to resort to using social welfare programs.

### **Main Characters in Four Common Settings**

In the two articles, the main characters, Japanese and Chinese Americans, appear in four common settings: historical, educational, familial, and criminal. With respect to the historical setting, both articles trace their histories from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when they started to arrive in the United States, through to the 1960s. The historical settings for the main characters are informed by stories of anti-Asian prejudice and discrimination in which Asian Americans are denied basic civil rights and targeted by racially motivated violence. The *New York Times Magazine* article depicts Japanese Americans as people who were subjected to "the vast mass of anti-Japanese agitation in the first decades of this century," "assaulted on the streets," "denied access to any urban professions," "denied citizenship," and "denied the ownership of the land" (Petersen, 1966, p. 21). After World War II began, they were "subjected in rapid succession to a curfew" and suffered from the "forced transfer of an entire population to concentration camps, where they lived surrounded by barbed wire and watched by armed guards" (p. 33).

Likewise, in the *U.S. News and World Report* article, Chinese Americans are described as people who suffered from numerous hardships and racial discrimination. The article points out that "Chinese could not

testify against whites in court,” nor could “Chinese-Americans...own land in California, and no corporation or public agency could employ them” (“Success Story,” 1966, p. 73). In 1871, “white mobs raged through the Chinese section” and “twenty-three Chinese were hanged, beaten, shot or stabbed to death” (p. 76).

In the educational setting, Japanese Americans are represented as extremely serious and strict about education because they regard it as *the* means of lifting their social status and being hired for middle or lower-level white-collar jobs. The article introduces a high school boy who “used to read his texts, underlining important passages, then read and underline again, then read and underline a third time” (Petersen, 1966, p. 38). Japanese Americans are described as choosing to study “business administration, optometry, engineering or some other middle-level profession” because they “obviously saw their education as a means of acquiring a stable skill” (p. 40). For them, education was “conducted like a military campaign against a hostile world: with intelligent planning and tenacity, they fought for certain limited positions and won them” (p. 40).

For Chinese Americans, the story stresses, education is as a way of creating disciplined, upstanding people. Their children are “expected to attend school faithfully, work hard at their studies—and stay out of trouble” (“Success Story,” 1966, p. 73). Parents’ “supervision and verbal discipline are strict” so if they are informed that their children’s school performance is poor, “there is an immediate improvement” (p. 73). Parents “always watch out for the children, train them, send them to school and make them stay home after school to study” (p. 76).

In the familial setting, family is portrayed as the most important entity that shapes and disciplines Japanese and Chinese Americans. The articles emphasize the importance of the authority of the parents and the loyalty to family. They attribute these characteristics to Chinese and Japanese tradition. Japanese Americans are portrayed as having a “greater attachment to family” and believing that “the wishes of any individual counted for far less than the good reputation of his family name” (Petersen, 1966, p. 41). Children learn to “honor [their] obligations to parents and avoid bringing them shame” by memorizing the *shushin* or maxims at Japanese language schools (p. 41).

Chinese Americans, as a group, are depicted as “a big family” (“Success Story,” 1966, p. 73). When they are in need, the reader is told, they do not need to turn to the welfare system to help them. If a person has trouble, “usually it can be solved within the family” (p. 73). Because of “a tight network of family and clan loyalties...relatives continue to help each other” (p. 73). A Chinese American banker in New York is quoted in the article as saying, “there are at least 60 associates here whose

main purpose is to help our own people” (p. 76). Chinese Americans are said to follow “the custom of being good to...relatives” and, as evidence of this tendency, readers are told about a man who came from China and was “looked after by his sister’s family” until he “opened a small restaurant of his own” (p. 74).

The criminal setting is described to emphasize the low crime rates and law-abiding tendencies of Japanese and Chinese Americans despite their overcrowded and overpopulated living environments. Although first and second generations of Japanese Americans “have lived in neighborhoods characterized by overcrowding, poverty, dilapidated housing, and other ‘causes’ of crime,” and have been “surrounded by ethnic groups with high crime rates, they [Japanese Americans] have been exceptionally law-abiding” (Petersen, 1966, p. 40). The article also mentions that “in Los Angeles today, while the general crime rate is rising, for Japanese adults it is continuing to fall” (p. 40).

When Japanese American law offenders are discussed in the article, they are linked with African Americans, Mexican Americans, and communists. Some Japanese American gangs are described as being “organized into gangs of 10 to 15 members, of whom a few were sometimes Negroes or Mexicans” (p. 40). Readers are told that a third generation Japanese American, who was charged with assault with intent to murder, was “a member of the Black Muslims” (p. 40). Describing the arrests after a Berkeley student riot, the article states that four out of the 779 arrested were Japanese Americans, but readers are also told that they were “atypical” (p. 40). Finally, the article tells the reader that “one [of the Asian American students arrested], the daughter of a man who 20 years ago was an officer of a Communist front, is no more a symbol of generational revolt than the more publicized Bettina Aptheker!” (p. 40).

For Chinese Americans, the article claims that “crime and delinquency are found to be rather minor in scope” (p. 73). Their children are depicted as not causing trouble thanks to “strict parental supervision” (“Success Story,” 1966, p. 76). Chinese districts are described as the “islands of peace and stability.” (p. 73). New York City’s Chinatown is “the safest place in the city” (p. 73), according to the story in the article, even though “the housing shortage here is worse than in Harlem” (p. 76). The article includes a quotation from a New York City police lieutenant who says, “you don’t find any Chinese locked up for robbery, rape, or vagrancy” (p. 76).

The article does describe some illegal activity in which some Chinese Americans have engaged. Readers are told “a youth gang of foreign-born Chinese known as ‘the Bugs’ or ‘Tong-San Tsai’ clashes occasionally with a gang of Chinese-American youngsters” (“Success Story,” 1966, p. 76).

The statement, however, is immediately set off by the following sentences: “Yet San Francisco has seen no revival of the ‘tong wars’...The last trouble between Chinese clans or ‘tongs’ was before World War II” (p. 76). The article continues to insist that Chinatown in San Francisco is safer than most places of the city “despite the fact it is one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the United States” (p. 76).

### **African Americans as a Supporting Character**

A key supporting character in the two narratives is the African American. Without the presence of this supporting character, the model minority narrative is not possible. The narrative of both articles is structured by the comparison between the main characters, Chinese and Japanese Americans, and the supporting character, the African American.

The two articles start and end with the comparison between Japanese and Chinese Americans and African Americans. The article about Japanese Americans begins with the following statement: “Asked which of the country’s ethnic minorities has been subjected to the most discrimination and the worst injustices, very few persons would even think of answering: ‘The Japanese American.’ Yet, if the question refers to persons alive today, that may well be the correct reply” (Petersen, 1966, p. 20). Immediately after this, the narrative continues with, “like the Negroes, the Japanese have been the object of color prejudice” (p. 20). What is represented as the distinction between the two is that Japanese Americans have “risen above even prejudiced criticism...by their own almost totally unaided effort,” whereas “for all the well-meaning programs and countless scholarly studies now focused on the Negro, we barely know how to repair the damage that the slave traders started” (p. 21).

The article ends with a discussion of the importance of minority groups’ cultural ties with their homeland, comparing Japanese Americans and African Americans. The article constructs the argument that the African American “with the least meaningful ties to an overseas fatherland...has no refuge when the United States rejects him,” whereas “the Japanese could climb over the highest barriers our racists were able to fashion in part because of their meaningful links with an alien culture” (Petersen, 1966, p. 43). Japanese Americans and African Americans are compared in this story without taking into account their different historical backgrounds. Nowhere in the story does the narrative explain why African Americans do not have meaningful ties with their homeland. On the one hand, the article claims that African Americans are “as thoroughly American as any Daughter of the American Revolution”; on the other, it insists that “placed at the bottom of this country’s scale, he [an African American man] finds it difficult to salvage his ego by measuring his

worth in another currency” (p. 43). The story neglects to explicate why African Americans as a group have to be *placed at the bottom of this country’s scale*, even though they are as American as White Americans.

A similar narrative structure is employed comparing Chinese Americans with African Americans. The article starts by presenting a socio-economic comparison: “at a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own— with no help from anyone else” (“Success Story,” 1966, p. 73). On the same page, Chinese American’s history is portrayed as “a story of adversity and prejudice that would shock those now complaining about the hardships endured by today’s Negroes” (p. 73). Chinese Americans are celebrated in this narrative because racism has ostensibly not prevented them from advancing in U.S. society in contrast with African Americans and other minority groups who need “assistance.”

The article ends with a comparison of racial prejudice against both Chinese Americans and African Americans. The narrative represents Asian Americans as having faced more racial prejudice than African Americans. The article includes a quotation from a social worker in Los Angeles who says, “it must be recognized that the Chinese and other Orientals in California were faced with even more prejudice than faces the Negro today. We haven’t stuck Negroes in concentration camps, for instance, as we did the Japanese in World War II” (“Success Story,” 1966, p. 76). This statement employs two different methods for abstracting African American and Asian American experiences from their historical contexts. The first half of the statement compares the racism Asian Americans faced in the past (before the Civil Rights Movement) with the racism African Americans contend with today (in 1966); the point is made for readers that Chinese Americans’ experiences with racism are worse than those of African Americans. The second half of the statement compares Japanese Americans’ experience during World War II with that of African Americans during the war; the story claims that African Americans were treated better than Japanese Americans. The former, by comparing two groups within different periods (past and present), and the latter by comparing two groups within the same period (World War II), work to produce a view that Asian Americans have suffered more racial discrimination than African Americans.

By comparing Asian Americans and African Americans, the two articles attempt to construct the idea that Asian Americans experienced racial prejudice and discrimination as much as or even more than African Americans; Asian Americans have elevated themselves on their own, whereas African Americans have not. The strategy is twofold: First, to

make Asian Americans equivalent to African Americans in order to be able to compare them; second, to place the former above the latter by using the former as an example that racial minority groups can uplift themselves without help. The first part of the strategy requires the revision of a common view regarding racial minority groups' history. The *New York Times Magazine* article asserts that "very few persons would even think of" (Petersen, 1966, p. 20) suggesting Japanese Americans have faced more discrimination than other racial groups. The *U.S. News and World Report* article similarly states that Chinese Americans' experience of racial discrimination "would shock those now complaining about the hardships endured by today's Negroes" ("Success Story," 1966, p. 73). The two articles, however, undertake to revise a historical view and replace it with the belief that Asian Americans have suffered more racial discrimination than African Americans. What the articles implicitly ask is this "rhetorical" question: if Asian Americans, who went through the worst racial discrimination, can move ahead in U.S. society without any help, why can't African Americans do the same?

Because the narrative is framed in a contrastive structure, the main comparison being between Asian Americans and African Americans, everything discussed in the articles can be read as a comparison, even when the two groups are not directly compared. African Americans barely appear in the historical, educational, criminal, and familial settings. They are, however, the "baseline" standard against which Asian Americans are measured. By depicting Japanese and Chinese Americans as performing well at school, having solid family ties, and committing very few crimes, the articles simultaneously indicate that the opposite is true for African Americans: African Americans do not perform well at school, do not have solid families, and commit crime more frequently. These images of African Americans are still prevalent in current racial discourses (e.g., Collins, 2000; Kim, 1999; Rome, 2002).

As Said (1979) contends, the concept of the West cannot exist without the creation of the East. Likewise, the model minority requires the "problem minority." Asserting that the Asian American is the model minority simultaneously implies that other racial minority groups are *not*. Because the narrative of the two articles is structured via the comparisons between Asian Americans and African Americans, the latter are constantly situated as the opposite of the model minority. In other words, "each commendation of Asian Americans is paired off against a reprimand of African Americans" (Wu, 2002, p. 62).

The absence of the historical setting for African Americans and the presence of the historical setting for Chinese and Japanese Americans magnify the idea that Asian Americans do well despite their experience

of racism, and, thus, the point is made that there must be something wrong with African Americans. The articles detail Chinese and Japanese Americans' historical experiences of racial discrimination, but avoid discussing the influence of slavery, which is trivialized as "the damage that the slave traders started" (Petersen, 1966, p. 21). This move veils U.S. institutional involvement and responsibility. It is true that Asian Americans were targeted by racially motivated violence, denied citizenship, and other basic human rights, and endured hardships because of racism. Asian Americans, however, were not slaves. African Americans were forced to come to the United States and were enslaved for centuries, whereas most Asian Americans, except for Southeast Asian refugees, were voluntary immigrants to the U.S. Like their White immigrant counterparts, they came to the United States voluntarily looking for a better life. Asian immigrants, however, were never "allowed" to become White and did not have access to White privilege like their White counterparts. Prior to the 1965 immigration act that reopened the door for immigration from Asia, only select people from upper or middle class households were likely to immigrate to the United States. For example, the Japanese government screened emigrants and sent those who were literate and educated because they were regarded as "[Japan's] representative[s] to the world" (Zia, 2000, p. 29). In order to come to the U.S. from Asia, emigrants needed to have, at the very least, the financial means to sail across the Pacific Ocean. As Wu (2002) points out, "in Asia, there are millions of urban and rural poor who do not have the means to travel out of the city or the village, much less to the United States." (p. 53). Financial, social, and cultural capital had to be accumulated to ensure a safe passage and successful settling once an emigrant reached the United States. Unlike African Americans, Asian Americans, when they came to the U.S., could take accumulated capital. By depicting a historical context only for Asian Americans, but not for African Americans, and, yet, offering a comparison between them, the articles obscure the historical context for African Americans. At the same time, the comparison, by contributing to the construction of a colorblind, neo-liberal, and individualistic worldview, serves the broader argument: U.S. society is fair and open, and people are, first and foremost, individuals whose lives are determined solely by their own current efforts.

### **White Americans as a Supporting Character and as the Main Audience**

Another crucial character in the myth narrative is the White American who serves as both a supporting character and as the main audience. As Nakayama & Krizek (1995) argue, the notion and phenomenon of whiteness relate to invisibility and neutrality; the White American, as a

supporting character, is either “neutralized” or invisible in the narrative. White Americans *visibly* appear in the *New York Times Magazine* article only as “neutralized” statistical numbers. For example, in the discussion of educational levels among different racial groups, the article notes, “Among persons aged 14 years or over in 1960, the median years of schooling completed by the Japanese were 12.2, compared with 11.1 years by Chinese, [and] 11.0 by whites” (Petersen, 1966, pp. 36, 38). The article includes White Americans when it statistically discusses occupation: “In 1960, Japanese males had a much higher occupational level than whites—56 per cent in white-collar jobs as compared with 42.1 per cent of whites” (p. 40). These comparisons with White Americans reinforce the “success” image of Japanese Americans, and the comparison is enabled by statistics abstracted from the different contexts for Japanese Americans and White Americans. For instance, Japanese Americans, whose property was confiscated during World War II, had to go to big cities, after they were released from concentration camps, where white-collar jobs were more available. However, all white-collar jobs are not the same: How many Japanese Americans in the 1960s were presidents or CEOs of big U.S. corporations?

The invisibility of White Americans does not imply that they are absent in the same sense that African Americans are absent in the four common settings of the narrative: they are ubiquitously present, but invisible. In the *New York Times Magazine* article, the passive voice is consistently used in the sentences that describe racial violence and discrimination against Japanese Americans in order to make the subject or the action-takers (White Americans) invisible. For example, we see this in the following two sentences: “Asians were totally excluded by the immigration laws of the nineteen twenties” and “Japanese were assaulted on the streets” (Petersen, 1966, p. 21). The narrative does not clarify *who* excluded Asians from immigration and assaulted Japanese Americans on the street.

In the *U.S. News and World Report* article, alongside Chinese Americans and African Americans, characters such as “a high-ranking police official in Los Angeles” and “a social worker” (“Success Story,” 1966, p. 76) in Los Angeles appear in the article and praise law-abiding, crime-free, and hard-working Chinese Americans. The high-ranking police official states, “*our* problems with the Chinese are at a minimum” (p. 76, emphasis added). The social worker says, “*we* haven’t stuck Negroes in concentration camps” (p. 76, emphasis added). Who are “we”?

White Americans also serve as the main audience. The model minority myth has been powerful because it adheres to an influential value shared by its audience: the Horatio Alger myth. The Horatio Alger

myth refers to the idea that “because this [the U.S.] is a free and open society, even a young man from the humblest of circumstances can rise to great heights in our meritocratic society if he puts his nose to the grindstone to develop his talents” (Harris, 1999, p. 145). Horatio Alger, Jr. authored more than one hundred books for children in the post-Civil War era. His stories were typically about poor and/or orphaned boys in big cities who became successful through hard work, self-discipline, and self-reliance. The “rags to riches” stories played a crucial role in popularizing the American myth of success or the American Dream: the belief that people, whatever their circumstances, can succeed in this open society as long as they make the effort to do so (Tebbel, 1963; Weiss, 1988). Today, the Horatio Alger myth corresponds to the ideologies of neo-liberalism and individualism, belief systems that assume society is neutral and open, and that people’s circumstances are not informed by history and other contextual considerations. As such, the Horatio Alger myth, via its shared assumptions with neo-liberalism and individualism, supports and perpetuates a colorblind ideology.

The *New York Times Magazine* article explicitly connects the model minority myth with the Horatio Alger myth. It portrays the “exceptional success” of Japanese Americans as a direct manifestation of the Horatio Alger myth: “Even in a country whose patron saint is the Horatio Alger hero, there is no parallel to this [Japanese American] success story” (Petersen, 1966, p. 21). The article concludes by exclaiming that “barely more than 20 years after the end of the wartime camps, this [Japanese American] is a minority that has risen above even prejudiced criticism” (p. 21). Japanese Americans achieved this “exceptional” feat, the story continues, “by their own almost totally unaided effort” (p. 21).

The *U.S News and World Report* article also re-produces a Horatio Alger image of U.S. society and attempts to represent Chinese Americans as Horatio Alger heroes. The article asserts that Chinese Americans follow “the old idea that people should depend on their own efforts—not a welfare check—in order to reach America’s ‘promised land’” (“Success Story,” 1966, p. 73). In the article, mainstream U.S. society is a neutral, fair, and open space in which people’s successes are promised as long as they work hard. Chinese Americans are “an important racial minority pulling itself up from hardship and discrimination to become a model of self-respect and achievement in today’s America” or people “winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work” (“Success Story,” 1966, p. 73). A Chinese American banker is quoted in the article saying, “we believe welfare should be used only as a last resort” (p. 76).

The model minority narrative in the two articles “rings true” to the mainstream White American audience because Asian Americans in the

two “success stories” embody a version of the Horatio Alger myth. Wu (2002) postulates that “the nation has become familiar with the turn-of-the-century Horatio Alger tales of ‘pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps’ updated for the new millennium with an ‘Oriental’ face and imbued with Asian values” (p. 41). The Horatio Alger myth is still influential in present day U.S. society. An example of a current manifestation of the myth can be found in U.S. Supreme Court Justice Powell’s opinion in the *Regents of University of California v. Bakke* decision (Harris, 1999). His opinion supports the myth by legitimating affirmative action programs *only* for the sake of institutional diversity without scrutinizing “academic meritocracy.”

Moreover, when former U.S. President George Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, instead of promoting Thomas’s credentials as a judge, the Bush administration “maneuvered to sell their nominee to the American people as a black Horatio Alger hero” (Decker, 1997, p. xvi). Justice Thomas, following suit, used a similar approach and appropriated the myth in his dissenting opinion of the University of Michigan Law School affirmative action case (Greenhouse, 2003, June 25).

### Conclusion

Via the contrastive structure of the narrative, two main characters in the 1966 model minority myth article—Chinese and Japanese Americans—are compared with and measured against a key supporting character, the African American. Due to this narrative structure, even when the main characters are the only ones explicitly performing “on the stage,” the supporting actor is always “present” as an indirect counterpoint. The absence and the “presence” of African Americans in the narrative play a crucial part role in establishing a colorblind view of U.S. society. As opposed to African Americans who are “present” even when they are absent from the narrative, White Americans, as another important supporting character, are invisible when they are present and are “neutralized” when they are visible. Such invisibility and neutrality make White Americans appear not to have any business with racial issues and produces another colorblind worldview. In addition, the two articles are told mainly for White Americans. The model minority narrative “rings true” for the main audience because the main characters, Japanese and Chinese Americans, evoke Horatio Alger heroes.

The model minority myth is a racial and political discourse motivated by particular circumstances informed by the socio-political context of the mid 1960s. The myth is alive and well today, in part, because of its usefulness in promoting colorblind, neo-liberal, and individualist

ideologies. As such, the myth strengthens those ideologies that, in turn, continue to elide institutional racism and reinforce white privilege. Depicting Asian Americans as the model minority who have succeeded in U.S. society despite racial prejudice and discrimination supports the idea that racial minorities bear the full responsibility when or if they live in poverty and work at menial jobs. That is, the model minority myth “situates Asian Americans as serving the function of legitimating status quo social institutions” (Nakayama, 1988, p. 71). Colorblindness “de-colors” people of color only superficially, but not substantially and, thus, sustains existing social, political, and economic structures that provide White Americans with various privileges.

Colorblind ideology not only perpetuates White privilege, but it also creates difficulties in creating interracial solidarity (Guinier & Torres, 2002). It is possible to think that the model minority myth influenced the 1992 Los Angeles riots when African Americans and Latinos attacked Korean American businesses and other Asian Americans. The riots occurred after a “not guilty” verdict was delivered on behalf of the White policemen who were charged with beating an African American man, Rodney King. Although it was White policemen who committed a racial crime, it was Asian Americans who were forced to pay the price in the riots. African Americans and Latinos attacked Asian Americans because they regarded Asian Americans as “surrogate Whites.” Preceding conflicts between African Americans and Korean Americans in the area also played a role. One of the most publicized conflicts occurred in 1991 in Los Angeles when a Korean American storeowner, Soon Ja Du, shot to death a fifteen-year old African American girl, Latasha Harling, because of an unpaid \$1.79 bottle of orange juice. Superior Court Judge Karlin put Du on probation with a \$500 fine and 400 hours of community service (Park, 1999). This extremely light sentence angered African Americans in South Central Los Angeles. Gotanda (1995) suggests Judge Karlin’s sentence was based on the model minority myth. The judge stereotyped Du as a hardworking and law-abiding “model” immigrant who was “harassed” by Harling, an African American whom the judge associated with crime and gangs. Du, with model minority privilege, was “judicially treated as a white” (Park, 1999, p. 66).

Kim (2000-2001), arguing that minority groups are not equivalent, postulates that throughout U.S. history, Asian Americans have been portrayed as being more privileged than African Americans. Thus, homogenizing all racial minority groups under the term *minority*, without acknowledging that inter-minority differences exist, serves to nullify “certain Black claims and grievances” (p. 38). It is not enough to refute the model minority myth by arguing that Asian Americans are not

advantaged because it simply provides Asian Americans with a “*bona fide* minority group” (Kim, 2000-2001, p. 44) status. Because of that status, Asian Americans have been used to “prove” that racial minority groups can move ahead in U.S. society. Yet, if Asians Americans’ relative privilege and advantage are addressed, Asian Americans cannot be utilized as evidence for such a colorblind claim. Although some Asian Americans have relative advantages and privileges, it is important to note that the levels of education and income among Asian American ethnic groups vary greatly. Not discussing the different contexts in which Whites and other racial groups are situated is also a way of sustaining colorblind ideology and White privilege. Labeling all racial minority groups as “the minority” is another way of promoting colorblindness. Rejecting the model minority myth entails seeing race relations not only *between* Whites and the “rest,” but also *among* the “rest” (or racial minority groups). It means specifying differences among minority groups and, above all, acknowledging Asian Americans’ *relative* privilege over other racial minority groups.

No discourse stands alone; discourses are always linked with other discourses (Volosinov, 1973). Likewise, a racial category is always defined by other racial categories. Thus, examining a discourse or a racial group necessarily involves examining other discourses or other racial groups. Challenging the model minority myth, therefore, necessitates scrutinizing its relations with other racial and political discourses such as colorblindness, neo-liberalism, and individualism, investigating racial relations between Asian Americans and other groups, and acting to change these discursive and institutional (thus material) practices.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bettina Aptheker was a leader of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in the 1960s. Her father Herbert Aptheker was a key scholar of African American history and a leading theorist of the US Communist Party until his resignation from the party in 1991.

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## **The Functions of Supportive Messages: A Qualitative Study of Interpersonal Communication Among Mothers of Multiples Within the Framework of a Multiples Support Network**

**Kim Gatz**

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*This essay examines the impact of supportive communication among mothers of multiples who have participated in a community-based support network. The author reasons that mothers of multiples experience greater health complications and stress than mothers who give birth to a single infant, and therefore these mothers would benefit from an enhanced social support network. The study's purpose is to identify the characteristics of supportive exchanges and their outcomes within a particular social network. It implements a retrospective survey of 24 such mothers who have participated in a community-based multiples support network and found that participation in a multiples support network produced socially desirable outcomes.*

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Twin birth rates have increased since 1980, up 74%, according to the *National Vital Statistics Reports* (2000). The report states that in 2000, the incidence of twinning occurred in 29.3 births per 1,000 total births, up from 18.9 in 1980. It reports that triplet and higher order multiple births surged between 1980 and 1998, but leveled off in 2000. The dramatic rise in multiple births over the last two decades is associated with two related trends: advances in assisted reproductive medicine and the older age of childbearing women (National Vital Statistics, 2000).

“Though a sense of pride in being ‘exceptional’ is often reported by mothers, ambivalence, shock, depression, and anger on learning of a multiple pregnancy have been found to be universal” (Thorpe, Golding, MacGillivray & Greenwood, 1991, p. 875). Healthcare professionals often suggest that expectant mothers of multiples<sup>1</sup> read literature or talk to professionals, such as a hospital social worker, to learn how to cope with their situation. These sources are where many women discover support groups for mothers of multiples. Support networks provide a foundation of support before, and more importantly, after the birth of multiples.

This study explores the reasons that mothers of multiples pursue self-help groups and it explores the impact of the mothers' participation. More specifically, the research investigates the functions of interpersonal communication among mothers of multiples within the framework of a local support network known as Rockford Area Mothers of Twins & Triplets Club (RAMOTTC). Research of this nature provides practical advice for the counseling and support of mothers within healthcare or social work situations. Studying supportive communication helps create a basis for advising people how to be more supportive (Burlison, Albrecht & Sarason, 1994).

## **Background**

There is a vast amount of research pertaining to twinning, including psychological, medical, and genetic aspects of twins. Surprisingly little research however, has been written concerning the determinants of parenting multiples. The pregnancy, birth, and caring for twins presents a series of life events that are different from, and typically more stressful than, those experienced by mothers who have single births (Thorpe, et al., 1991). Mothers of multiples commonly experience clinical complications that cause them to be hospitalized during their pregnancies. Pre-term labor is 10 times more common in a multiple birth pregnancy, and the incidence of toxemia (raised blood pressure and fluid retention) is three times as high (Harrison, 1983).

The delivery of multiples is also more complicated, with babies often facing hazards. About one-half of all twins and three-quarters of triplets are born prematurely (before the completed thirty seventh weeks' gestation). Some premature babies do not have mature lungs, the ability to regulate their body temperature, or the ability to eat on their own (Harrison, 1983). As a result, babies born prematurely are placed into the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) where they are separated from their mothers. Babies continue their development in an incubator, attached to ventilators, oxygen, and feeding tubes. Concerns about the fragile health of their children are no doubt sources of emotional stress and anxiety for many mothers of multiples.

When a mother takes her babies home, she has not only more than one infant to care for, but babies who are likely smaller, more difficult to feed, and more prone to infections than the average single baby (Bryan, 1989). Feeding multiple infants inevitably takes most of the day and night for the first few months. Mothers' difficulties early on are due to the overload of daily tasks: feeding and sleeping patterns for multiple babies, excessive laundry, and other childcare patterns (Roblin, Corroyer & Casati, 1996). Mothers of multiples frequently experience guilt and

frustration about dividing their time between the babies and dealing with infants' needs simultaneously. These feelings may be exacerbated if there are additional children who also demand the mother's attention. Mothers of multiples often need information and support from others who have been through the experience. The present study is one of only a few to examine the effects of social support on the well-being and parenting outlooks among mothers.

## **Literature Review**

Early research on the broad topic of social support dates back to the 1970s. Social support was seen as emotional caring and mutual acceptance (Cobb, 1976). More recently scholars conceptualize social support as a communication process that occurs within an interpersonal relationship (Burlison, Albrecht & Sarason, 1994; Duck, 1990). Duck says social support is created in and experienced through communication. Burlison et al. argue that social support must be studied as communication because it is conveyed through messages directed by one individual to another in the context of a relationship. Most recently, studies have focused on the process of building social ties and the cognitive and emotional reactions to supportive communication (Putnam, 1999). Therefore, for the purposes of this research, social support is conceptualized as a communication process within an interpersonal relationship, citing these scholars as support for this definition.

Scholars in the field of social support have classified supportive interactions into different typologies of support. Most commonly, researchers identify differences in informational or educational support and tangible or practical support. House (1981) classifies supportive communication into the following categories: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. He defines emotional support as concern, empathy, and caring communication. Instrumental support refers to the giving of one's time to help or assist another. Informational support means providing education or advice, whereas, appraisal support indicates evaluative feedback and encouragement.

A growing body of evidence reports that social support has serious implications for mental, emotional, and physical well-being of recipients (see Turkat, 1980; Cutrona, 1986; Tardy, 1992). Research studies prove that social support provides a buffering effect on individuals experiencing stressful life events (see Cobb, 1976; Cutrona, 1986; Duck, 1990). According to the buffering model (e.g., Cobb 1976), social support protects individuals by promoting adaptive and coping responses to the emotional and physical demands brought on by stressful life events.

Cutrona (1986) uses the buffering model of social support to show a correlation between social support and lower depressive moods in individuals. Tardy (1980) found that supportive messages were perceived as beneficial to a person working on a problem-solving task.

While much of the sophisticated research on social support has focused on support and mental and physical illnesses, social support has also been associated with a reduction in maternal distress. For example, Colpin, De Munter, Nys, and Vandemeulebroecke (2000) found that parenting stress in mothers of one-year-old twins was significantly predicted by pre- and postnatal personal well-being and marital support. Flannigan's (2000) study showed that social support through participation in a mom's support group positively influences the self-esteem of new mothers. Studies show that from the mothers' point of view, the benefits of social support involve the notion of not being alone in their distress and experiencing the acceptance of others (Groothuis, 1985; Bryan, 1989).

### **A Support Group**

Over the past two decades local self-help groups for parents of multiples have been started throughout the country. There are now hundreds of clubs representing tens of thousands of members registered under the umbrella of the National Organization of Mothers of Twins Clubs, Inc. (NOMOTC). One such local club is the focus of this study. Rockford Area Mothers of Twins & Triplets Club (RAMOTTC) offers members tangible and emotional support through their participation in club activities. Rockford Area Mothers share monthly meetings, playgroups, and rummage sales, as well as family activities for them and their family. This organization offers mothers of multiples the opportunity to develop supportive relationships that may offer practical support exchanges: meals for new mothers, advice and acceptance through difficult parenting challenges, and much needed social contact to boost morale and parenting outlooks.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of the study is to identify the characteristics of supportive exchanges and their outcomes within a particular social network, RAMOTTC. The two questions pursued in this research are (1) What do mothers of multiples articulate to be the most salient features of participating in a supportive communication network? And, (2) What communication messages do mothers of multiples see as most helpful, and what are the least helpful messages, in expressing support?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This investigation utilized a convenience sample of 63 mothers of multiples who were recruited from the RAMOTTC. Recruitment of participants was limited to the membership list for RAMOTTC as of October 1, 2002, and was limited to those members who had twins or triplets because none of the current members had quadruplets or higher order multiples. Expectant mothers were excluded from this study.

Sixty-three questionnaires were sent to potential interviewees and 24 (38%) of them responded. Within the responses, there were 16 mothers of twins (67%) and 8 mothers of triplets (33%). The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 51, with the mean age being 35 years. Of the respondents, forty-six percent had at least one child in addition to their multiples. The average length of membership in the support group was 3.4 years.

Permission was obtained from the RAMOTTC president and executive board before sending the questionnaire to the sample population. A cover letter explained the purpose of the study and asked participants to fill out the questionnaire. It also informed the interviewee that her participation was voluntary and that all responses would be kept confidential. Participants could request an online survey or complete the survey that was mailed to them. Respondents were not paid for participation in the study.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions followed by open-ended retrospective questions. The participants were asked to describe the first few months after the birth of their multiples. They were asked to explain in detail the things that were particularly stressful or difficult. The participants were asked how they first heard about RAMOTTC and why they joined. In addition, they were asked why it was helpful to communicate with other mothers of multiples. Other questions involved communicated advice and/or feedback and topics of discussion during support group meetings. Finally, interviewees were asked how their participation in RAMOTTC affects their coping skills and/or parenting outlooks (see Appendix A for survey protocol). A pilot study with mothers of multiples was conducted to validate potential information that would be gathered from the survey. Modifications were made in the wording and sequencing of questions as a result.

## **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using a qualitative/comparative approach following Strauss and Corbin (1998). Constant comparative analysis involves comparing incidents in the text and looking for connections in the data; therefore, the data analysis process consisted of three primary phases. First, the researcher read through all 24 questionnaires for a comprehensive view of the participants' experiences and views. Initial emergent themes in the data were recognized while discrepant cases were also noted. A second coder validated the initial coding patterns determined by the primary researcher.

The second phase of analysis involved the researcher re-reading the responses, but with more attention to answering the posed research questions. An Excel spreadsheet was used to organize the data by summarizing the constructs and making the data more manageable. Doing this also made data patterns more recognizable. The Strauss and Corbin (1998) constant comparative method of data analysis was used to identify themes. In particular, open, axial, and selective coding were used to identify categories and determine discrepant cases. Categories recognized across multiple interviews were considered viable.

In the third and final phase of the analysis, the researcher went back to the text in the surveys to better comprehend the context of each response and to verify the original analysis of the data. A further refined categorization scheme was assigned. The categories were operationalized in more detail and examples were taken from the data to illustrate each category. The researcher identified the frequencies for each category.

## **Results**

The additional and extraordinary stresses that mothers of multiples encounter were the focus of questions one and two in the questionnaire. Question 1 asked the participants to describe the first few months after their multiples were born. Question 2 asked, "What things were particularly stressful or difficult?" The responses to both questions are used to describe the adverse conditions facing the participants and to provide background surrounding their experiences. The data produced clustered themes concerning health issues of the babies, mothers' health issues and fatigue, and stresses about the care of multiple children.

Babies' health issues were expressed in fifty-four percent of the responses. This was not surprising since a majority ( $n = 16, 67\%$ ) of the mothers had premature children. The range of prematurity in the infants was from 25 to 36 weeks' gestation. Virtually all the health issues raised were due to the prematurity of the infants. In several cases, mothers

described literal life and death experiences. A mother of 25 weeks' gestational boy/girl twins wrote,

*Extreme prematurity, with its attendant health problems for the children is as scary as it gets for a parent. One never knew what she would face walking through the doors of the NICU each day... A child who was healthy the day before could be spiraling into a life threatening infection... the negative possibilities were, it seemed at the time, endless.*

A mother of 16-month-old triplets recalled, "All three babies were in the NICU for the first eight to ten weeks. It was stressful. One baby had four surgeries before she came home." A 40-year-old mother of 1-year-old twin girls wrote, "It was very sad and difficult to have babies in the NICU. I cried every time I was there. It was also hard to leave one baby in the NICU while the other baby was able to come home."

Other health issues arose after the babies came home. Some dealt with lasting effects of prematurity, while another experienced an even greater loss. A mother of 31 weeks' gestational boy/girl twins wrote,

*After they came home, my son was still on oxygen and required additional medical attention...All of the medical equipment (oxygen tanks, monitors, suctioning machine, IV's being administered to prevent RSV) was very stressful.*

A 29-year-old mother of twin girls recalled, "At five-and-one-half weeks Rebecca got sick again and required breathing treatments every four hours. She was then placed on an apnea monitor that seemed to continually have false alarms." One triplet mother faced an unimaginable loss. She wrote, "In January, my youngest triplet son developed bacterial meningitis and passed away...Dealing with the loss of my infant son was by far the most difficult thing."

Mothers' health issues and fatigue were common in the responses to questions one and two. Several mothers discussed their recovery from the birth, while others mentioned recovering from problems during their pregnancy. A mother of 4-year-old boy/girl twins wrote, "I was healing from the emergency c-section and coming off the pregnancy hormones." Another mother wrote, "I had been on bed rest (in the hospital) for ten weeks and had a c-section so it took a couple of weeks for me to get my strength back." A 32-year-old mother of triplets said, "I had to recover from bed rest, a c-section and take care of three babies all within a week."

The physical and mental demands of caring for multiples were also at issue for these women. A mother of 20-month-old twins said, *“The first few months were very emotional and exciting. Sleep and feeding schedules were hectic. It was an adjustment for everyone.”* Another mother confessed, *“The twins cried a lot. When I was attending to one (diaper change, etc.), the other was crying and vice versa.”* A 35-year-old mother of twins said, *“It was non-stop nursing and changing diapers. I got very little sleep and had very little help.”*

Sleep deprivation in the mother was common with a majority (n=16, 67%) of the participants recognizing fatigue as an early source of stress. The phrases “around the clock feedings,” “extremely sleep deprived,” and “very tired” were predominant themes in the responses. A mother of 1-year-old triplets said, *“Mentally and physically, it was probably the toughest time of my life.”*

Table 1 summarizes the constructs of the participants’ responses to questions one and two. The table illustrates the commonality of the experiences by noting the frequencies and reflecting representative quotes reported by the sample.

<b>TABLE 1</b>		
THEMES FROM OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS ONE AND TWO		
Theme	Frequency@	Representative Responses
Health problems of infants NICU/hospital	23	All three babies were in the hospital for eight to ten weeks. The stresses of sick premies were tiring. At fifteen days, they were admitted to the hospital for Parainfluenza for ten days. Rebecca was diagnosed with acid reflux. I would nudge the babies to make sure they were still breathing.
Mother's health issues Mother's recovery	7	I spent 8 weeks in the hospital on bed rest. I was healing from the emergency c-section. I physically could not take care of the babies myself.
Tired/sleep deprived	19	...extremely sleep deprived I was very tired most of the time.
Childcare patterns Feedings	15	...non-stop nursing ...double feeding ...night feedings were very challenging Adjusting to feeding and caring for two instead of one
Crying	6	...stereo crying ...coping with colic
Other duties	11	...daily chores I found it difficult to keep up with everything i.e., shopping, laundry, cleaning...
Other children	6	...three year old sibling needed me ...constantly worried that my [older] daughter was being neglected

@ The frequency reflects the total number of responses fitting a particular category.

Overwhelmingly, the surveys presented themes of stress and adverse conditions in these mothers of multiples. However, there were discrepant cases in the data. One 36-year-old mother of 16-month-old twin boys wrote, *“I tried never once to complain about being tired, as we felt so blessed with the twins!”* A 38-year-old mother of 4-year-old triplets recalls, *“It was a very exciting and happy time because the triplets were all very healthy.”*

The second part of the questionnaire inquired about the mother’s pursuit of RAMOTTTC. Question 4 asked participants, “What were the major reasons why you joined the support group?” Responses were brief and to the point. Most answered using phrases rather than sentences. Fifty percent of the mothers expressed the desire to network with other moms like them as the primary reason they joined. Phrases indicative of these responses were “to meet other multiple moms,” “to be with others who were experiencing similar things to me,” and “to gain support from other mothers of multiples.” Nine of the mothers (38%) expressed the desire for information, tips, and advice about parenting multiples. The following are phrases from the responses.

*“I knew no one with triplets, [other triplet mothers were] a valuable resource.”*

*“I wanted to learn some strategies and coping skills for raising twins.”*

*“To get tips on dealing with two babies at a time.”*

Nine respondents (38%) said social reasons drove them: “a night out,” “to make friends,” and “for social events.” A few individuals cited specific activities such as the rummage sales and play groups as reasons to join.

Examples of specific typologies of support are uncovered in the remainder of the questionnaire. Salient features of the mothers’ participation are interwoven into their answers. Specifically, Question 5 asked, “Why was it helpful to communicate with other mothers who were/are like you? When reading through the mothers’ narratives in response to this question, it was clear that the women were receiving emotional support. The participants expressed feelings of understanding and empathy from other members. Sharing a common bond in the parenting of multiples was the most salient reason for these mothers to network with one another. One mother of 4-year-old twins wrote, *“Just hearing someone else’s story that was so similar to mine made me feel better. Like I was talking to someone who really understood how I felt and what I was going through.”* Another mother of twins recalled, *“It*

*made me feel for the first time, that some aspect of my motherhood of twins had become normal.*” A 38-year-old mother of twins said, *“It is helpful to know that I am not alone in my struggles with time, discipline, etc.”* A 32-year-old mother wrote, *“Most people do not understand what it’s like to have multiples. It was the first time I could announce that I had triplets and not have everyone ‘freak out!’”* It is apparent from reading the narratives that these women felt a sense of belonging and compatibility.

The next two questions offered more salient features of participation. Most experienced informational support types; another experienced instructional support types. Question 6 asked, *“What educational/discussion topics were particularly helpful? Which were least helpful?”* The mothers’ narratives strongly reflected informational/educational support received, especially during monthly RAMOTTC meetings. *“Twin-talk”* was mentioned in several interviews. Twin-talk refers to break-out groups by type of multiples (boy/girl twins, same sex twins, and triplets). One mother wrote, *“I feel twin-talk discussions are the most helpful. You can ask questions and receive feedback from other twin moms who have been through different stages before you.”* Other mothers recalled educational/informational meeting topics, such as safety talks, school issues, healthcare issues, and discipline. Several mothers wrote about social aspects of the club. Examples include:

*“Just to get away for a few hours and converse with other twin moms helped renew my spirit.”*

*“The most helpful aspect of the club for me is just socializing with the other mothers.”*

One mother received instrumental support. She wrote, *“During my pregnancy, the other moms were helpful in preparing me and my home for the future.”* Few mothers addressed least helpful messages. One mother wrote, *“Least [helpful] were topics that did not apply to me or I already knew about.”*

Like Question 6, Question 7 also uncovered informational and instrumental support types. It asked, *“What advice or feedback that you received from members was/is particularly helpful? Which was least helpful?”* Informational support in the form of advice was noted by 34-year-old mother of 4-year-old boy/girl twins:

*“[The best advice I received was] not to feel guilty to do what you have to do with/for multiples (propping bottles or letting a child cry*

*while changing the other) even if a ‘childcare expert’ says you shouldn’t. Let common sense be your guide.”*

A mother of 1-year-old triplets wrote, “*Most of the advice during the first year came from other triplet moms about schedules, strollers, feedings, and other items.*” Five respondents wrote about other members giving of their time in order to assist them, or instrumental support. For example, three mothers mentioned phone calls or outside contact with members providing assistance. Another said meals for new moms (this is a service offered by this organization). Playgroups and activities are also examples of instrumental support received.

Several respondents discussed least helpful advice. One mother wrote, “*While I was shopping at one of the rummage sales, a mother of twins told me she would just want to kill herself if she had triplets – I didn’t find this helpful!*” Another mother confessed, “*[Least helpful advice is] ‘don’t worry about the housework’, I am more stressed when things are messy.*”

The final question in the survey asked the mothers how participation in RAMOTTC affects their parenting outlook and coping skills. When reading through the mothers’ narratives, it was apparent that appraisal support is also a salient feature of participating in this organization. There were clustered themes present in the responses concerning confidence, reassurance, and comfort. Some of the phrases used to describe this type of support are the following:

*“I feel very confident as a mother of twins because I have seen other moms who have ‘been there’ before.”*

*“It gave me more confidence that I was handling the ‘parenting’ side of multiples as best as I could – and that is all that matters.”*

*“It is great to know others who have done it! There’s something comforting about getting together with other moms of multiples.”*

*“I have gone into multiple meetings feeling overwhelmed and sad and have always left with a new and better attitude.”*

*“I have become a better parent by the influence of many other moms.”*

Instrumental support was also mentioned again. Moms enjoy the activities that RAMOTTC offers them. Some examples were playgroup, rummage sales, the newsletter, and social activities.

## Discussion

This ideographic study focuses on the utility of social support derived through relationships formed within a supportive network. The qualitative study of 24 mothers participating in a non-formalized local support group (i.e., RAMOTTC) revealed that participants received emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal typologies of support that resulted in positive outcomes and social capital for the mothers. The study gives vivid testimony to the value of support networks. The most salient feature for the participants was the discovery that they are not unique in their situation. This discovery made them feel less alone, thereby reducing feelings of distress and making them more receptive to coping strategies offered by members who have experienced similar situations.

The discussion of this research focuses on the study's relevance to previous literature. These findings support the stress-buffering model of social support used in previous social research. Individuals who mobilize social support use those resources to manage and cope with stressful life events (Cobb, 1976; Cutrona, 1986; Duck, 1990; Tardy, 1992). Specifically, these results parallel results from Cutrona (1986). She concluded that individuals receiving emotional support (expressing concern, caring) and informational support (offering advice and help on a problem) reported lower levels of depressed mood following stressful events. The current findings also support Tardy's (1992) research in that instrumental support improved performance on cognitive tasks.

This investigation adds to the findings of both Flannigan's (2000) and Colpin et al.'s (2000) studies concerning social support and parenting distress. The current research parallels Flannigan's (2000) findings in that resources offered through participation in a mom's support group contribute to a mother's feeling that she can better handle parenting challenges and also improves psychological distress in participants. The present research also supports Colpin et al.'s (2000) study in that social support reduces parenting distress in mothers of twins.

Consistent with Putnam's argument: social networks are valuable. The findings of this study support the social capital theory. Putnam argues that although the use of social capital is declining in modern society, self-help and support group membership is increasing. The present study illustrates RAMOTTC as an example of such social capital in an organization. Members build social ties, which help them to become more productive in their own lives. Social capital is a salient feature of participating in RAMOTTC.

The benefits of social capital are important to mothers of multiples. With the dramatic rise in multiple births, information on the health and

well-being of mothers of multiples will be in demand. Healthcare and social work professionals who treat these mothers can use this study as a valuable resource to share with their clients. Social support research helps to teach people how to be more supportive (Burlinson et al., 1994). Research of this nature will augment the utility of social support in the lives of people.

### **Limitations**

Apart from the practical and conceptual contributions of this study, several limitations must also be recognized. The utilization of a self-selected, small convenience sample brings into question the degree to which the present sample is representative of the entire population of mothers of multiples. Therefore, it is difficult to imply that these results can be generalized to the larger population.

Another important limitation to the study was its reliance on retrospective interviews conducted through written questionnaires. The retrospective nature of the interviews allows for information to be forgotten through selective and/or faulty memory. Also, the researcher was not able to probe for additional information or clarify statements made by the respondents (e.g., it is not known whether the mothers are both primary caregivers as well as home-makers). Finally, participants may have produced overly positive views of their experience because of the nature of the questions in the survey. For example, was unhelpful communication under-represented? It may be that people who experienced disappointment were less open to participate in the current study or are no longer in the group.

### **Future Research**

The sheer scarcity of research in this area provides ample opportunity for more investigation. Although the current research found transient effects of both practical and informational support in mothers of multiples, other populations that face different kinds of problems may show even more enduring outcomes. For example, a study may address social support and single mothers or social support in parenting children with special needs. Future researchers should also consider using other methodological and theoretical examinations of mothers' experiences. In particular, the reframing of this study using a feminist perspective could yield important scholarship about prescriptive gender roles for women.

Future research should investigate the effects of typologies of social support on psychological outcomes, especially concerning stressful events. Research is needed to examine what individual and environmental

factors determine the effectiveness of social support groups. Social researchers should explore moderating variables that are involved in social support, such as the length of sessions or duration of participation.

### **Conclusion**

“Parenting multiples can seem to be an overwhelming task. It is vitally important to the health of the family to establish a support system” (National Organization of Mothers of Twins, Inc. web page). The current research offers descriptions from mothers who participated in a support network, RAMOTTC. It finds that members of this community-based support network benefit from emotional, informational, instructional, and appraisal typologies of support, and, thereby, experience socially positive outcomes and social capital. This study reports that the most salient feature of their participation is the common link shared by group members. The common experiences shared by these women offered them assistance in conquering their parenting challenges.

This study reveals important observations about the social support process in general. The present study confirms and extends the findings reported in other studies: supportive communication provides important benefits to its recipients (Cutrona, 1986; Cobb, 1976; Tardy, 1992). The current research also augments more recent research on social support and its specific benefits to mothers (Colpin et al., 2000; Flannigan, 2000). It is through further research that social support may live up to its full potential in helping people mobilize needed support to make their lives more adaptable to stressful or life changing events.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The term “mother of multiples” is conceptualized by the researcher as mothers who have given birth to more than one child at a time: twins, triplets, or higher order multiples (quadruplets, etc.). Although being a mother of multiples is the foundation of this study, the researcher does not imply that being a mother of multiples characterizes the sole identity of these women, and she acknowledges the complexity of their lives and roles outside of mothering. However, this research reveals that mothers refer to themselves as “twin mom,” “mother of twins,” and “mother of multiples” throughout the interviews. The researcher also cites other recent studies for their use of the term “mothers of twins,” etc. (see Thorpe, et al., 1991; Robin, et al., 1996).

## Appendix A Survey Questionnaire

### Part One: Demographic Information

The first part of the questionnaire is designed to gather background information regarding you and your experience with multiples (twins, triplets or higher order multiples). If there is other information that you think is important, please feel free to add this information where necessary.

Name: (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Email: (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

List the sexes and age of your multiples? (e.g., 4 year old boy/girl twins)

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you have children in addition to your multiples? Please list their sexes and ages.

\_\_\_\_\_

Were your multiples born premature? (e.g., 37 weeks or less) Yes No

If yes, at what gestational age were they born? (e.g., 32 weeks) \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been a member of Rockford Area Mothers of Twins & Triplets Club (RAMOTTC)? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you join RAMOTTC before your multiples were born? Yes No

If you joined after, how old were your multiples when you did join?

\_\_\_\_\_

How many meetings did you attend in the first year, or plan to attend in the first year? Circle the best answer. 0-1 2-4 4-6 7 or more

How many activities did you attend during the first year, or plan to attend in the first year? (e.g., play groups, rummage sales, family events) Circle the best answer. 0-1 2-4 4-6 7 or more

### Part Two: Primary Interview Questions

Answer the following questions using as much detail as possible. Provide specific examples where applicable.

1. Describe the first few months after your multiples were born.
2. What things were particularly stressful or difficult?
3. How did you first hear about the Rockford Area Mothers of Twins & Triplets Club?
4. What were the major reasons why you joined the support group?
5. Why was/is it helpful to communicate with other mothers who were/are like you?
6. What educational/discussion topics were particularly helpful? Which were least helpful? Please explain.
7. What advice or feedback that you received from members was/is particularly helpful? Which was/is least helpful? Please explain.
8. How does/did your participation in RAMOTTC affect your coping skills and/or parenting outlook?

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## **Dialogic Communication Instruction: Public Speaking, and an Ethic of Care**

**Rochelle Robertson**

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*Interrogating personal and professional power and “traditional” public speaking instruction, I re-think and re-present some of my own teaching practices, suggesting and explicating a Freirian alternative to powered instruction: dialogic problem-posing. Focusing on teaching “moments” that took place in a class I formerly taught, I critically examine, from a critical pedagogical standpoint, instructional requirements and choices and their potential impact on students. Paulo Freire’s theory is central to this analysis, as are the insights of other educators and critical pedagogues such as Henry Giroux, Maxine Greene, Nel Noddings, and Ira Shor. In this essay, I call for alternative, conscientious, caring, and dialogic, or potentially transformative public speaking instruction.*

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Freedom goes to the articulate. With effective communication I decide who will pay me or love me or vote for me [...] share my truths, purchase my deodorant.

Hart, “Why Communication?” 101

The task of philosophy and knowledge in general, is not so much to find answers, but to ask questions, and to ask the right questions.

Freire, *The Paulo Freire Reader*, 227

I vividly remember the morning of my first speech presentation. I was a college sophomore enrolled in a required speech course, and I had prepared an informative speech on the topic, “Ghosts.” As my instructor suggested, I’d done my homework in preparation. I crafted an attention-getting ghost narrative for an introductory opener. I prepared a clear body for the speech, complete with research citations as proof. I had visual aids to augment my speech, and a concise ending that told-the-audience-

what-I'd-told-them one more time. Still, I was terrified. At 8:14 that morning, according to my digital watch, I *embodied* my speech topic. That is to say I *looked* like a ghost or as if I'd recently seen a ghost: white as a sheet, shaking, and nauseous, standing behind a podium in front of the small, but attentive, audience of twenty or so other sophomores and my instructor.

Thinking back to that day, a decade of public speaking instruction now in my stead, I can confidently critique that particular speech performance with the ease of a teacher with experience. Though the speech had been well organized, I spoke too fast, stumbled over some words and mispronounced others, did not project my voice, and forgot oral citations. Even though I was a Theatre major at the time, I failed to perform my opening narrative, read my speech "script" right off of the typed page, and clung to the sides of the podium as if my life depended on it. I continued delivering the conclusion of my speech two minutes past the time limit (five to seven minutes). My final statement was rushed. I dropped my voice at the end of the last, barely audible phrase and quickly took my seat in the audience, winded and exasperated. When my breath and equilibrium returned, I remember feeling as though I'd failed and hoped to miraculously improve on the next assignment.

It is somewhat comical and ironic to realize, after the fact, that one of the reasons I'd chosen to speak on the paranormal, a topic about danger, was in a vain attempt to ward off public speaking anxiety. The author of our Communication textbook advised choosing a topic I was personally interested in and excited by—one compelling enough to alleviate my fear, guarantee audience attentiveness, and, thus, assure my own effective performance.

In reality, even though I was sure I had prepared adequately and made good choices, personal and situational obstacles worked against me and confirmed my worst fears. In retrospect, I might explain my foray into public speaking using communication terminology found in many basic course texts (Dunn, 1988; Trenholm, 2001; Wood, 1998). My unanticipated, but seemingly inherent anxiety, the length of my prepared speech, and the requirement of giving my first public presentation on this complex topic all worked to intensify my intrapersonal and interpersonal feelings of danger. I experienced a kind of "reaction formation" (Dunn, 135) that morning—I was thinking one thing and doing another. I used defense mechanisms against myself. For example, I was present, but "distanced" myself from my feelings, using "psychological withdrawal" (Dunn, 134). The experience negatively impacted my self-image and affected my overall self-esteem. Was the experience a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, or was it simply a failed

attempt on my part to be a confident and competent communicator? I wondered if anyone empathized with me.

No longer a frightened student, I am now a reasonably confident instructor, and I've begun to be consistently self-reflexive about my teaching. I often interrogate my values and practices, asking myself not only about *what* I am teaching, but also about *how* I am teaching it, and, as importantly, to *whose* advantage and/or disadvantage do those *whats* and *hows* relate. These are critical questions that transcend my feelings of compassion for my students. *Webster's Dictionary* defines "compassion" simply as "pity, sympathy" (87). I am not interested in pitying students. Pity positions an instructor in a power-over position. Pity implies a teacher has it figured out and is a well-spring of knowledge from which enlightenment might flow, and a student, sorry character that he or she is, just doesn't "get it," or just can't "do it." Instead, with Michael Apple and James Beane (1995), I value instruction that paves the way for students to "learn to be 'critical readers' of their society" (13). Like Apple and Beane, I encourage students "to ask questions like these: Who said this? Why did they say it? Why should we believe this? and Who benefits if we believe this and act upon it?" (14). To question *what, how, why, and who* are central concerns in a democratic, or equitable, classroom.

These are also critical pedagogical questions. In the introduction to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), Donaldo Macedo describes and defines pedagogy as "having Greek roots, meaning 'to lead a child'" (25). Paulo Freire advocated childlike, humble, and co-constitutive instruction. Maxine Greene, bell hooks, Peter McLaren, and Ira Shor are critical pedagogues who urge instructors to ask: Who is in power? Why does he/she have this power? Who benefits from power relationships? Who may be silenced by this power or because of this power? Henry Giroux (2000) describes a critical pedagogical classroom as one that encourages students to "understand how power works *on* them, *through* them, and *for* them" (139).

Looking back on this experience through the lens of critical pedagogy, I begin to ask myself a series of questions. I wonder what lessons my instructor intended for me to learn from my first speaking experience; and, which lessons I learned unintentionally. What might I have failed to learn then, and why? What lessons do I intend for students in my classes to learn and which do they learn despite my intentions? Who is, ultimately, responsible for learning, student or teacher? Or, is it a mutual endeavor? Even more specifically, who has been *empowered* and who *dis-empowered* in my communication classrooms? Why? What has been *gained* through required public speaking experiences, *according*

to whom and to whose advantage and disadvantage? What, or who, may have been *lost*?

Paulo Freire (2000) applauded questioning, calling it “a profoundly democratic thing” (*The Paulo Freire Reader* 221). With Plato, he contended “everything begins with curiosity and the asking of questions” (224). My questions are the impetus for, and the central problematic of, this article. I have constructed this essay in the spirit of what H. L. Goodall (2000) calls “the new ethnography” (9). I write from “a tension between incomplete personal evolution and the desire for a complete scholarly arrival” (Goodall, 8). I believe that crafting and critiquing “creative narratives shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences” (9) can be especially revelatory. In this spirit, the essay revolves around a teaching “moment” with a particular student who struggled in a hybrid basic public speaking/interpersonal communication course I taught a few years ago. In an attempt to provide this student with an opportunity for empowerment through an assigned Speech of Introduction, I fear I may have discouraged, delimited, and even dehumanized him through my lack of “power-sharing” (Shor, 62). I engaged in a form of “banking” (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 71), or oppressive, powered-over instruction wherein all-knowing teachers “deposit” knowledge into students-as-receptacles. In what follows, I offer a narrative description of the “moment(s)” with that student. At the same time, I reconsider the “moments” using a Freirian logic. My essay is premised on what Nel Noddings (1992) describes as “care” (xiv), and I critically examine my own instructional practices through this alternative lens.



The student in this narrative, who I will call “Ben,” was a member of an introductory speech class, Speech Communication 101, which I taught two years ago. In the first week of class, he self-identified as a “poor white boy from the wrong side of the tracks.” He was tall with a strong, athletic build. This student (and others in class, who were all friends) was part of an “Advantage” program that housed freshman groups who entered college together on the same residence hall floor. In addition, because of the confidential reports I was asked to fill out documenting his academic “progress,” I was aware that this student was in a “Skills” program designed to give students the opportunity to learn basic college “survival” skills. Outside of class, he shared his student status and self-perception with me. He explained that when he applied for college, his grades and test scores had not been high enough, in his words, to “allow”

his placement in “regular” academic courses. He said he had been “granted” an academic probation period to “catch up” with other students.

Regardless of his status, he was an excellent student. He attended class regularly and was enthusiastic, creative, animated, and communicative. He was often a spokesperson in small groups, he was vocal in class discussions, and he told me that although he’d never given a speech before, he was looking forward to his first presentation. I had no doubt he could and would succeed in my class.

The first speech I assigned early that term was a Speech of Introduction. This introductory speech is one of three required speeches in Speech Communication 101. The course is designed to teach organization and provide students of all skill levels with the opportunity to build confidence in personal and presentational ability. Though 101 assignments tend to vary depending on who the instructor is, these speeches, taught in all basic course sections, require students to speak for at least three minutes (no more than five) and to construct the content of their speeches in an organized format. I typically require students to write and deliver speeches in introduction-body-conclusion form and to provide oral and written citations for their research. I emphasize enthusiastic, animated delivery, and I evaluate speeches on the basis of organization, content, and overall presentation. I also require students to augment their speeches with visual aids (e.g., videos, posters, or clothing). This semester was no exception.

There was, however, one difference in this assignment that set it apart from Speeches of Introductions in previous classes I’d taught: this assignment included a popular culture corollary. As a third year Ph.D. student, I was researching and writing about the appeal of television. I was convinced that if students could integrate media into their presentations, their speeches were bound to be more interesting and educational. In addition, since a number of students in class had expressed their discomfort with being required to deliver a self-disclosive speech to an audience of semi-strangers, adding popular culture to the mix seemed a fitting way to provide students with an alternative. I (uncritically) assumed that if students introduced a TV celebrity, they would not have to talk about themselves. Instead, they could talk about an “other.” This strategy would likely discourage speeches from beginning, “Good afternoon. My name is...” and serve to alleviate public speaking anxiety. I was sure that despite the diversity of learning styles, backgrounds, and interests in our class, the assignment would be appealing.

In his speech, Ben chose to introduce Michael Jordan to the class. More a sports figure than a television celebrity, Jordan *was*, nonetheless, appearing frequently on TV in televised games, cartoons, and on

commercials. Dressed in blue jeans, worn tennis shoes, and wearing a Bulls hat and T-shirt, Ben walked to the front of the room behind the podium and stood ready to give his speech. “Oh,” he said. “Wait. Don’t start the time. I almost forgot.” He ran back to his desk and pulled a rolled up poster out of his gym bag. Jogging back up to the front of the class, he looked at me. “Got any tape? I forgot. I wanna hang this up.” I turned his attention to the thumb tacks above the chalkboard, and he tacked a poster of Jordan up next to his place at the podium. With a textbook as a paperweight at the bottom of the poster resting on the chalkboard shelf, he managed to keep it rolled down and functioning as his visual aid. He, then, began his speech. “This,” he pointed to the poster, “like you didn’t know already, is Michael Jordan, my idol. And today I’m going to tell you why he’s *just like me*.”

Ben fumbled through the entire body of his speech. Not unlike my first speech performance, he read from a pre-written page he held in front of his face, one hand holding the paper, the other gripping the podium tightly. He crammed the words of his speech together, and spoke quickly, nervously. In an unconscious attempt to calm his nerves, he swayed from foot to foot, and his eyes did not meet the audience but for a single glance or two mid-presentation. He stuttered and mispronounced words, sweating and struggling to breathe smoothly.

In what was most likely an attempt to present his speech in an entertaining fashion, Ben frequently used sarcasm. When he referred to Jordan, for instance, as the “best basketball player of all time,” he said it in a tone that suggested he didn’t *really* think this was the case, (or at least, as an audience member, I could have easily interpreted it that way). I was confused about whether Ben was being sarcastic about Jordan’s basketball career to *degrade* Jordan and *inflate* himself (yeah-like-HE’S-the-best), or using sarcasm to show he was well aware that “Jordan really *is* the best...”, a worn out characterization too often reiterated in the media.

Finally, Ben had deliberately chosen to “wear” his speech with apparel suited to his presentational topic. He wore a new Bulls hat, which partially concealed his eyes, and a brand new T-shirt that looked as if he had just recently purchased it from the college bookstore. Either he was really a Bulls fan, or he was performing “fan” for the purposes of the speech.

It is customary for me to provide students with thorough evaluation sheets, typed or neatly hand-written, usually within a week of the completion of their speeches. On the evaluation sheets, I explain my choices and invite students to discuss evaluations with me outside of class and in my office. I’ve found that, generally, students who take me up on my offer and come to the office are usually disgruntled about their

grade. When Ben came to my office to discuss his speech grade, he was not the same student I had come to know in the first three weeks of the semester. He was not positive, excited, creative, enthusiastic, or all that communicative. He sat down in a chair next to my desk, eyes fixed on the floor, and asked what he had done wrong, as if he had been accused of a crime.

I responded with an often reiterated, standard, peacekeeping response: I told him he had “done just fine.” I then proceeded to deliver a lofty speech of my own, attempting to make the case that “D” is not a *bad* grade. Insisting it was only a slightly below average grade in ‘what’s-wrong-with-that?’ fashion, I explained to him how I’d perceived his speech delivery (doing so by generalizing my own perceptions of the class’s perceptions). I verbally critiqued his lack of eye contact, his slogan twist (“just like me”), and the way he “wore” his speech. I also pleaded with him not to be discouraged, insisting that this first speech was a way for everyone to test the waters so we would know what to work on for future improvement.

Ben nodded in affirmation while I was talking, as if resigned to accepting his fate. He exited my office in silence and was quiet in class during the days that followed. After that first speech, Ben’s “progress” began to slide down a slippery slope. His attendance dwindled. Ben refused to further self-disclose in any fashion, and he stopped turning in written assignments. He did not attend class the day he was scheduled to deliver his second, Informative Speech and, eventually, Ben left class altogether.



During a standup comedy routine I once saw on television, Jerry Seinfeld, working from the premise that public speaking is people’s number one fear (second only to death), told an audience, “This means most people would rather be in the casket than delivering the eulogy.” Having the opportunity to speak publicly in a communication course is supposed to help students build confidence as speakers and to develop general communication competence. If public speaking can be so empowering, why does it dis-empower some students? Self-reflexively, I ask myself if I am asking the wrong question. I turn my attention away from public speaking and toward my own instruction. For example, after critiquing my own instructional values and practices, I find myself a poor example, an “accomplished” public speaker wanting to hide in the “casket.” After all, I have talked the talk of valuing education which is democratic, critical, and caring, “engaging and encouraging, [fostering] well-being and whole[ness]” (hooks, 15). I have also placed students at risk with

my required Speech of Introduction assignment and graded them poorly when they failed to “perform” (i.e., delivering confidently, in an entertaining fashion, and fulfilling the assignment guidelines). These choices and consequences have been neither democratic nor dialogic. At best, they have been oligarchic and dictatorial. Practicing what I preach when I teach has been easier said than done.

I will return to these critical considerations shortly. Before doing so, however, it is important to explore the philosophical and theoretical tenets of a Freirian alternative to power-laden instruction, to understand a critical, dialogic approach to pedagogy. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), Paulo Freire insisted upon a *dialogic* or power sharing alternative to power-laden or “banking” instruction (72). Freire described banking education as “empty,” alienating and “oppressive; a dehumanizing condition [where] ‘A’ objectively exploits ‘B’ or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation [...] especially when sweetened by false generosity” (55). In this practice, “students become containers, receptacles to be filled by the teacher and education becomes an act of depositing” (72). For example, when banking:

the teacher teaches and students are taught; the teachers know everything and the students know nothing; the teacher thinks and the students are thought about; the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly; the teacher sets [his/her] authority in opposition to the freedom of students (73).

Instead, classrooms should be places of “critical and liberating dialogue [as opposed to] monologue, slogans, and communiques [which characterize students as] masses to be manipulated” (65).

Freire described dialogue as “a process [of] unveil[ing] new knowledge, of learning and knowing” (Macedo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 19). According to Macedo, dialogue is *not* “uncritical appeals to the discourse of experience [or] a romantic pedagogical mode that ‘exoticizes’ discussing lived experiences as a process of coming to voice” (18). Macedo warns educators of the danger of “misinterpreting Freire’s notion of dialogical teaching [refusing] to link experiences to the politics of culture and critical democracy” (18). He also warns of confusing Freirian pedagogy with a “teaching method rather than a philosophy or social theory” (24).

In this essay, I am suggesting dialogic communication instruction that is true to a Freirian intention, a pedagogy practiced “with not for students, in an incessant struggle to regain [or to respect] humanity”

(*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 48). Paulo Freire defined dialogue as “the encounter between men [and women], mediated by the world in order to name the world, [a way for people] to achieve significance as human beings; a necessity” (88). Freire insisted dialogue is an act of “creation” not “domination”; [it is an act] which is “loving” (89). Dialogic instruction then, is inseparable from an ethic of care. With dialogic instruction, this care emerges “naturally” in shared curiosity, in discussion between “teacher-students and students-teacher” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 80). I revisit my own teaching to ascertain alternative ways I might have instructed more humanely. With this philosophical and theoretical backdrop, I return, now, to critical reflections of my own teaching and offer alternatives to my initial approach that could have ensured more humane instruction.



Because the student was strong and looked athletic, I assumed he would be automatically confident, and that he could effortlessly control his body while speaking. Unfortunately, this student did not appear confident during his presentation. One might say, in the case of this first-time speaker, his body was fighting his “body.” Presenting the *body of his speech* was causing his *physical body* a great deal of stress and strain, while the tension manifested throughout his physical body was making it impossible to comfortably deliver his speech. Regardless of whether we consider our own bodies powerful and competent, they may not be perceived as such. We may also be seen as able bodied when we are really shaking in our proverbial boots.

In this case, stereotyping initially led me to conveniently forget the student’s skill level, his at-risk status, and his lack of experience with public speaking. This is ironic, given my own instructional “preaching” about the dangers of being too quick to judge. I’ve devoted entire class periods to extended considerations of stereotyping, describing it as a way of “putting people into categories based on generalized characteristics” (Dunn, 367) or judging by appearances, as in a “book by its cover.” Suddenly I am guilty of the “crime” I’ve so often spoken against. Worse, the student came to the office to “discuss” his poor grade. This “victim” must have felt “blamed” for what he thought was a crime committed against him. William Ryan (1971) begins his book with “an extreme example of Blaming the Victim: [an] impersonation of a Dixiecrat Senator conducting an investigation of the origins of World War II, asking ‘What *was* Pearl Harbor doing in the Pacific?’” (3). Ryan insists this is an all-too-common educational practice that is “technically comic, but hardly ever funny” (3).

While audiencing this student's speech and when critiquing it in my evaluation, I stereotyped him based on his external characteristics. In the first case, I had not overcome the lofty expectation I held that this student, who looked like a linebacker for the college football team, could and would successfully "tackle" public speaking. The former influenced the latter. I assigned low points in the category of delivery, insisting that his "performance" appeared "forced" and his enthusiasm was "lacking." Yet I had not allowed students to: a) have any input on the generation of this speech assignment, b) discuss corporeal issues related to public speaking in class, or c) practice their speeches in class before delivering them for a grade. I had, in true power-over form, neglected "cogovernance [...] instead of or power-sharing or shared authority" (Shor, 62). I had taught public speaking "traditionally," which Shor writes, many teachers often find "simpler and safer [than] risk official punishment or professional isolation by experimenting for critical change" (62). This is not the caring instruction to which I aspire. I am loath to admit the possibility that what was missing in my instruction had manifested itself negatively in and on this student's body. There is an alternative: facilitation of a dialogic speech preparation process.

After all, I had designed the Speech of Introduction to my own satisfaction, assigned it uncritically, and evaluated it according to the standards I put forth. In other words, I had participated in "banking" instruction. As aforementioned, in this model, a teacher teaches, knows, thinks, and talks as if he or she is intellectually enlightened and superior. The students are taught, "know nothing" (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 71), are thought about, and listen. Inevitably, the teacher's authority is manifested in opposition to the students' dis-empowered position. This cancels out opportunities for co-learning and knowledge building. It also silences, as opposed to inviting or creating space for students' voices. Freire wrote, "Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words. To *name* the world [is to] change it" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 88).

Dialogically, we might have learned together. Freire described dialogue as an act of co-creation, "not a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another" (89). For example, our pre-speech preparation dialogue might have started with a "problem" posed from the concrete situations of the persons in the class, breaking the "vertical patterns characteristic of banking education" (80). I might have, *with* the class, asked students to voice or "name" their ideas about what a Speech of Introduction is and should be, what it might do or accomplish, and/or how we might do it together. Instead of bringing in a prepared assignment and handing it "down" to the class, I might have come prepared to discuss

the Speech of Introduction as a “problem.” By problem, I do not mean an obstacle, but, instead, as an opportunity for idea-sharing and knowledge generation from our lived experiences, trusting that students *with* teacher, and teacher *with* students might build the assignment together in a mutually respectful act of co-learning. True to Freirian form, this would be a “conscious, liberating education[al] act of [critical] cognition” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 79). Students would “no longer [be] docile listeners, but now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (81).

Pedagogically, this also has the potential to increase personal and political awareness. For example, *Who* is in power may be discussed and reconsidered. The very act of problem-posing the assignment is fodder for discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of powered instruction and learner positionality. *How* becomes a mutual endeavor. Actions speak louder than words. Working together to generate the assignment is a move toward leveling the power “playing field” of the classroom, making it more equitable. Competition may become cooperation. Suddenly, we are not talking *about* the politics of teaching and learning, we recognize that we are co-participants *in* these politics. *What* is being done is re-perceived and redirected, intentionally caring and careful, as opposed to being judgmental. *Why* becomes empathetic, and public speaking can be re-perceived as more than a one-shot performance. We may not be able to actually walk in another’s shoes, as empathy is often defined by course texts, but we may walk in our own shoes alongside or genuinely *with* others. Metaphorically, we may also decide it would be advantageous to trade shoes or, as a group, not to wear any at all. In the end, benefits, as well as consequences, are shared and, most importantly, perceived and discussed in the spirit of learning, as opposed to getting the assignment “over with” or earning an A, the symbol that has come to represent communication competence.

Education in this sense is more truly democratic—it is of, for, by the people. It is also woven with an ethic of care. For Freire, dialogical instruction is an act “of profound love for the world and for the people” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 89). It is not a once-for-all evaluation, but a critical co-investigation—a knowledge and confidence building learning opportunity. To continue this investigation of alternatives, I will now revisit and extend this example of dialogic versus banking instruction.

I had hoped that designing the Speech of Introduction assignment as I did would accomplish multiple educational goals. Specifically, I operated on three problematic assumptions. First, I hoped students would be enthusiastic about picking someone from television on which to focus their research and presentation. David Bianculli (2000) writes about the risks and potential benefits of television. For those who “connect” with

television shows, he suggests, TV may be “instructional, empowering, and often a friend” (194). I uncritically assumed that using TV to give an otherwise bland, formal assignment flare would be beneficial. Second, researching a celebrity had the potential to make searching for sources somewhat simple, interesting, and fun. I was sure this approach would allow students to generate creative presentations. Finally, choosing a celebrity to focus on would make it possible for students to shift the focus away from themselves. Students could be at least once removed from the risk of self-disclosure by referring to an “other.” They would not *have* to talk or reveal anything about themselves to their classmates unless they chose to weave personal information into the body of their speeches. In reality, this power-laden assignment required students to make assumptions about celebrities, to identify with persons they most likely only knew through media, to perform in an entertaining fashion regardless of their skill level, and, ultimately, the assignment functioned as a self-disclosive “risk.”

For example, the student in this scenario fulfilled the terms of my assignment but still received a poor grade. With his clever twist on “Be Like Mike,” the larger than life poster, and wearing his Bulls “uniform,” he *did* present an attention-getting opener and used a visual aid to enhance his presentation. He *had* performed the opener of the speech, albeit in a stiff and nervous fashion, and wore clothes that were intended to lend him credibility. He spoke to the audience in a tone of an “extended conversation” as Julia Wood (1998) suggests (283) and as my assignment required, and *was* introducing a celebrity. What went wrong?

First, because this assignment was developed and “banked” in my instruction, students, though they had the *illusion* of choice (i.e., could “choose” the celebrity and/or could “choose” *how* they would deliver the speech), they actually had few choices. To earn a high grade, they were required to choose a celebrity *from TV*, deliver the speech in an *entertaining* fashion, and display a visual aid. It is quite possible that, as a first-time speaker and at-risk student, Ben was “oppressed” by a multitude of pressures that prevented him from speaking credibly to my satisfaction. Not only did he have to, on his own time, research the speech, craft it in writing, and practice it to fit within three to five minutes, this student also had to make his speech into a dynamic show of “bells and whistles.” He had to say it and display it, show *and* tell.

These requirements may not seem like much. After all, this *was* a college course. However, allow me to do the math concerning some of the obstacles impeding the student’s presentational “success.” First, required *before* the student’s delivery began: preparation, research, time, practice, and gathering of materials, *plus* the pressures of anticipating

speaking *before he spoke the first sentence* standing in front of an audience. Consider appearance, visual aids, tone, pitch, cadence, physiological anxiety, and psychological fear. *Multiplied* by actual delivery: speaking loudly, clearly, in an understandable dialect in an organized and entertaining style. The “numbers” add up, but the outcome does not compute. After all, how much *choice* in any of this did the student *really* have?

Second, to further complicate matters, though students were required to introduce an “other” in order to circumvent self-disclosure, speeches were ultimately self-disclosive. For instance, the student in question chose to introduce Michael Jordan. Explicitly, the student was not required to talk about himself. Implicitly, what wasn’t verbalized spoke volumes. He introduced Michael Jordan as opposed to another celebrity. This revealed something to our audience about his likes and dislikes in media, sports, and, possibly, personalities. The student “displayed” Jordan as larger than life, equated himself with Jordan, and went one step beyond (“he’s like me”), using sarcasm to express this, unintentionally giving an audience varied impressions about his perception of his own self-image and esteem. In addition, he was inadvertently disclosing his credibility as a speaker.

A speech presentation can cause a downward spiral for any presenter, especially a first-time speaker. The more uncomfortable a speaker is, especially when nerves or insecurities are manifested in the physical body, the more difficult it is to listen to a speech. The more difficult a speech is to listen to, the harder it may be for an audience to accept a speaker’s words or believe a speaker is credible. The less credible an audience thinks a speaker, the less they are likely to listen, and the harder the speech is to hear, or believe. Further, the less the audience listens or believes, the more likely a speaker is to intuit this is happening and that he or she is “failing,” causing the quality of his or her delivery to waver and decline.

As not only the instructor, but also an audience member listening to his speech, I was left wondering about this student’s intentions. Given his sarcasm, for example, I found it difficult to grasp whether he was self-disclosing as a fan or fanatic. Students in class had talked sports before, drawing a distinction between “fan” and “fanatic.” Apparently, to be a fan is complimentary. It implies true respect and admiration. The fanatic or “poser” is unrealistic and insincere. Fanatics “follow” for the admiration and acceptance it brings *them*. This student’s presentation caused me to ask myself if he was really a fan or just performing “fan” for the purposes of his speech. With his eyes hidden and his jersey too new, struggling to smoothly deliver his sentences and entertain using

sarcasm, he made a dishonest impression. While attempting a tribute, he appeared to be projecting his insecurities out at the audience. I was left with a negative impression that influenced the way I graded this student's speech. From an evaluative instructional standpoint, I decided this speaker failed to meet his presentational goal. Or did he fail to meet my presentational goal?

Looking back, I think about the ways my powered, banking instruction had positioned him. More specifically, during speech preparation I had told students that "wearing their speeches" would lend them credibility, which obviously, this student took seriously. In many cases, owning and showing off one's admiration of celebrity enhances a speaker's presentational honesty. Yet, it was partly this student's "wearing" of his speech that caused me to mistrust his presentation. First, he was supposed to introduce Michael Jordan and, instead, he spoke as if he *was* Jordan. In fact, he tried to establish that he was *better* than Jordan. Literally, his brand new outfit did not match his words. If he were really so into basketball, wouldn't he have worn this "uniform" more than once? Second, figuratively speaking, he did not "wear it well" in the sense of making a formidable impression. He stumbled, struggled, and sweated through his presentation, which no outfit could conceal. Therefore, in the end, whether he did what I advised or failed to do it (whether he wore his presentation or not), he still would have made a bad impression and received a poor evaluation. Doesn't this assign "blame" to the "victim"?

None of the risks or benefits of self-disclosure had been discussed in class prior to speech deliveries. We did not talk, as a class, about the *implicit* assignment requirements, only the *explicit* ones. As mentioned, students were not allowed time to practice or give each other input. Each student was given the assignment and left to his or her own devices to prepare and deliver a suitable and formidable public presentation. Sure they may have had the "tools" they needed to succeed—a course text with plenty of advice, my assignment guidelines, instruction in classes proceeding speeches, and each other if they chose to take that initiative. But why must students be "washed up" on an educational "island"? Apple and Beane, Freire, Maxine Greene, hooks, Noddings, Shor, and others argue for co-constituted education. In classrooms, we are a mini educational community. We do not exist alone, in class or society.

Dialogically re-considered, there are a multiplicity of communal alternatives. Why not begin preparing for speeches by problem-posing about the risks and benefits of self-disclosure? Wood (1998) argues "self-disclosure can foster trust and closeness, insight into ourselves, and knowledge of others"(156). Conversely, "self disclosure also entails risks

[which include] others might reject you [and] others might think less of you and you would lose face” (156). In a Freirian sense, if students-*with*-teacher were afforded the opportunity to dialogue about the benefits and risks of disclosure, how might the Speech of Introduction assignment be designed together, to our mutual satisfaction?

From a critical pedagogical standpoint, such dialogue might also lead to an interrogation of “subjectivity” and “objectivity.” Freire argued “banking education resists dialogue [and] treats students as objects of assistance [whereas] problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 83). Critical, dialogical class interaction would likely incite curiosity about the advantages and disadvantages of being positioned as subjects (active participants) versus objects acted *on*, inside and outside of the classroom.

Similarly, speech preparation might also have included critical discussion about media and power, what constitutes entertainment for whom, in what context, and to whose advantage and disadvantage. Dialogue, emergent from the concrete experiences of learners, might have foreshadowed the impossibility of the students meeting the entertainment requirement. Class sessions before speech deliveries could have been devoted to trying out presentational choices and styles, followed by dialogue about credibility. We might have discussed the implications and consequences of our choices, and what those choices might mean for which speakers, according to whom, and why. Preparation for public speaking is potentially a learning experience extravaganza, woven with consciousness and care, embracing various bodies, styles, and skill levels. Dialogic communication instruction in an ethic of care would value students-teacher *with* teacher-students. Designing the Speech of Introduction assignment democratically and *practicing* speaking together would be a shared learning *opportunity*. I do realize, however, grades are still due at the end of each term.

I have always struggled with grading and evaluating. I’ve discovered there is a fine line between observation and accusation, the place where critique for “constructive” purposes has the potential to become “destructive” criticism. In the past, I’ve graded Speeches of Introduction according to standards put forth on my assignment sheet, basing my choices on my expectations and requirements. In a powered-over fashion, I have prioritized teaching students the skills I most want them learn in my class.

From my standards, requirements, and expectations, to the “ivory tower” of the teacher’s office where I have “invited” students to come “discuss” their grades, I have unintentionally embraced power-loaded instruction. There are few places and spaces, actual or metaphorical, more

powerful than the teacher's office. Since elementary school, this has represented the "bad place" where students who don't behave have to go. In the earlier classroom scenario, the student came to my office to discuss and was rendered silent. He came with next to nothing and left with less.

As Freire noted, there *are* alternatives to this powered instruction, namely a co-intentional, dialogic re-consideration of power dynamics, which has the potential to lead to transformation instead of creating a "culture of silence" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 53). Might I have prevented myself from doing more harm than good by problem-posing about evaluation *with* students during class? Might I have trusted them enough to critique each other and me? If this had been the case, concerning the student in question, I would not have blamed the victim for a crime committed against him. At least we would have "committed the crime" together.



To use a well-worn cliché, all that glitters is not gold. That is to say, what I am suggesting in this article is certainly not a one-size-fix-all or an add-discussion-and-stir. Ira Shor (1996) writes about what can happen concerning students and power when students have power. Like Shor, I believe in democratic pedagogy, which has the potential to "offer a cultural experience not available anywhere else" (105). Yet tangling with critical pedagogy in actual practice left Shor powerless and exasperated by the end of one semester. He writes, "I reached a point where I faced negotiating myself out of existence" (60). Others have also experienced similar challenges when approaching instruction critically and dialogically (Boyd, 1999; Burbules, 2000; Gur-ze'ev, 1998; Lather, 1998). However, I do contend that dialogic facilitation and shared instruction is a formidable alternative to handing down an assignment, requiring communication competence on a first try, and negatively evaluating students who fail to perform, usually to the detriment of their self-esteem.

Few things are more risky and difficult than public speaking. When I critically reconsider the presentation of my first speech and the Speech Communication 101 scenario offered here, I am moved to recognize the variety of obstacles impeding communication competence. Joe Ayers, Tim Hopf, and Debbie Ayers (1994) discuss competence as overcoming "stage fright, communication apprehension, reticence [and/or] public speaking apprehension" (252). Public speaking has a tendency to weigh on students like the force of an avalanche even before the first word of their speech is spoken. For some, myself included, climbing Mount McKinley barefoot might seem less ominous. Metaphorically, I remember

climbing up and through my first speech presentation, step by painful step, only to get to the top and feel as if I'd fallen right back down to the bottom of the proverbial mountain. I am suggesting that dialogic communication instruction, woven with an ethic of care, is one way to make the climb *together* easier and, perhaps, avoid the fall.

In conclusion, my narrative and analysis is offered as a thought-project, designed to interrogate my own teaching in a basic course classroom and to envision alternatives. I believe every public speaking situation is potentially a risky, dangerous physical, mental, spiritual "place." I believe we can not look past the *reality* of what we do in the interest of adhering to worn-out or unrealistic philosophies, grading "across the board," insuring recruitment, retention, or for departmental or disciplinary legitimization.

If nothing else, this reflection about my own practice is intended to put students first, seeking the "creation of a world in which it will be easier to love" (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 40). Ben's public speaking experience (and my initially careless response to it) demonstrates the need for an ethic of purposeful care in communication instruction. Concerning educational care, Nel Noddings (1992) writes, "One of the greatest tasks of teachers is to [care about students and] help students learn how to be recipients of care. Those who have not learned this are at great risk, and their risk is not just academic" (108). I hope my reflections contribute to the dialogue of critical instructors concerned with conscientious and caring instruction. I've come to realize that in order to care *for* students and *with* them, I have to care *about* my own instruction.

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## Author

Rochelle Robertson is a doctoral student in the Department of Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Her research interests include critical pedagogy, media, and rhetorical studies. Currently, she is investigating power and instruction in basic course classrooms. In her dissertation, she metaphorically and critical re-considers traditional instruction in order to, using a Freirian ethic, offer dialogic alternatives.

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