

**STORYTELLING AS NARRATIVITY:
RURAL LIFE THROUGH THE PRISM OF SOCIAL TENSIONS**

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ABSTRACT

This introductory article provides purpose and rationale for this special issue of *Southern Rural Sociology*. The remaining six essays represent stories based on the authors' farm experiences, crafted to explicate the tensions that underlie all of social life. Illustrating the connection between rural life and the world of ideas, the work makes explicit how the often unrecognized contradictions of everyday society are balanced through choices that typically exist at an unconscious, taken-for-granted level. Each author describes a particular dialectic. Collectively, the writers have transformed their narrative to narrativity, the formal imposition of moral purpose on storied form. Although our purpose is primarily pedagogical (making the implicit explicit), the personal essays incorporate the pleasure of narrative and the insight of narrativity.

Farm Stories and University Education

Both the family farm and university have fallen on hard times in America. Perhaps nothing illustrates the problem of the small farm as well as the rise of mega corporate livestock enterprises—chickens, hogs, and beef. The small herds and barnyards that marked the farmsteads of yesteryear have disappeared, replaced in large part by today's concentrated production techniques. For universities, the halcyon years are likewise long past. Accountability, budget cuts, and pressures from state legislatures have forced a corporate mentality in which the traditional faculty governance model, once focused on classic liberal education, has succumbed to budget-driven marketing, niches, and "customer satisfaction" in which high quality, rigorous intellectual challenge is among the last considerations (cf. Hersh and Merrow 2005). Yet these two troubled institutions have more in common than most realize. Too often, the two worlds are treated as separate and distinct, resulting in the lack of productive discourse between these two venerable institutions.

This separation is a real loss for students, indeed for much of America's population, most of whom no longer have any close connection to or knowledge of

the farm. Yet what would happen were we to incorporate insights about rural life into the university classroom and public discourse? Stories have the potential to improve both our teaching and our understanding of rural society. First, anecdotes enrich discussion and lecture. Students respond positively to storytelling and their memory is enhanced when ideas are associated with narrative. As Kieran Egan (1997) has noted in *The Educated Mind*, we are hardwired to this perspective, having evolved in an oral culture over the vast majority of our human existence. Second, the analogous reasoning inherent in the utilization of stories posed as examples represents higher order levels of cognitive thought (Bloom, Krathwohl, and Masia 1984), a counter to the common emphasis on fact-based, rote standardized testing, a tendency exacerbated by the current accountability movement (Sheldon and Biddle 1998). The potential for learning generated by novel circumstances treated through analogies is consistent with the best traditions of a classic liberal education: questioning basic assumptions, considering society critically, playing with ideas, bringing creativity to thought, making connections across disparate constructs, and generating new knowledge.

As Phil Schlechty and George Noblit (1982) have noted, one of the greatest challenges of good social science is making the obvious obvious, i.e., making things that are “understood” at a tacit, implicit, taken-for-granted level take on explicit recognition, concrete in its meanings. Much easier and less common are making the obvious dubious (dispelling myths) and making the hidden obvious (uncovering the unknown). For the difficult leap from implicit to explicit, a change of context—the unusual, the jarring, the nostalgic past—can facilitate our transition. More typically, we navigate the common activities of daily life on autopilot, following routines and habits that we “intuit” but do not “see.” The techniques of storytelling, focused on the antiquated notions of the farm, represent effective teaching strategies that generate real engagement and significant learning. The trick is to ensure that these personal experiences are germane—that they rise to the level of critical thought.

From Narrative

Stories represent a universal across cultures. Hayden White (1980) suggests that to ponder narrative is to reflect on the nature of culture itself. Storytelling predates recorded history; in fact, the past in preliterate societies was embedded in stories (Egan 1997). Those who had both the skills and memory to weave these events into spellbinding tales were revered for their knowledge and élan. The death of these individuals meant not only the loss of the person but also the demise of an

all too temporary repository of the culture's collected wisdom. White (1980) speaks to the universalism of storytelling:

narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture specific. (p. 5, emphasis in the original)

The notion that narrative transcends specific cultures is key. Following Barthes, White (1980, p. 6) states that stories seem able to maintain their integrity even when translated across cultures. It follows that narrative constitutes a meta-code, a human universal, trans-cultural in its unique capacity to transmit shared meanings of reality across groups.

It should be noted that the trans-cultural characteristics of narrative imply translatability across subcultures as well. Whether the divide is past vs. present, rural vs. urban, plains vs. forests, one language vs. another, one ethnic group vs. a different race, or poor vs. affluent, stories resonate—their message penetrating to the core human commonality beneath the overlay of different lifestyles. While oral renditions no longer have to function as recorded history, in many respects stories maintain their centrality in the creation and maintenance of the common bonds of a culture. Tall tales, fables, fairytales, the canon of great works of fiction—all work their magic through the elements of the story. Supplementing these shared accounts of the culture's core values are the narratives that bind communities, families, and churches together. For example, a staple of family reunions is the storytelling, passed down from generation to generation. Pictures and now family videos become the center of new stories. Like the oral cultures of old, the family raconteur still holds a special place in these gatherings. And lest we forget, stories mark the common draw of two venerable American traditions: those collections of men, mostly elderly, that gather across the country at the local Dairy Queen, country store, or other local haunt to uphold their community's moral center; and the kitchen coffee klatsch where women cement common values around school, church, and children's activities. (We recognize the gender stereotype here, but while times are changing, this trend remains easily recognizable.)

To Narrativity

To this point we have focused primarily on the function of narrative in culture and its capacity to transcend differences. Apart from White's (1980) formalistic description of narrative, our primary sense of what storytelling entails is tacit. White is more explicit when he notes, again following Barthes, that narrative represents attempts to describe our experiences and our surroundings in language, i.e., the story "ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted" (p. 6).

Although storytelling is essentially an informal process, played out by individuals across time and culture, narrative can also take different forms. Stories may represent formal and ritualistic aspects of some cultures. They can also be fictional or based on real events or even hybrids of both. The personal essay can be thought of as a mode of inquiry, the aim of which is "to present the complex portraits of a human being" (Lopate 1994:xxix). In the words of Michel de Montaigne (as cited in Lopate 1994:xxiii), because "[e]very man has within himself the entire human condition," the "snail track" of personal experience becomes the author's vehicle for commenting on the sweep of history (Lopate 1994:xxxvi).

In contrast a primary purpose of scholarly discourse is to transcend the more personalized meanings in various forms of narrative, which are often imbued with the "storyteller's stretch"—exaggeration, inconsistency, faulty memories, or personal bias. In other words scholarship aims for objectivity, scientific validity, reliability—all wrapped in the mantle of historiography, sociological models, psychological theories, or political verities, depending on the discipline invoked.

Within this context, narrativity can be thought of as the formalistic imposition of storied form on non-storied events. Still, historians and other scholars soon run into a conundrum. If the personal bias of a narrator can be called into question, the alternative of narrativity requires that the story be told as if it unfolds on its own. As Benveniste (cited in White, 1980, p. 7) suggests, "[h]ere no one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves." To reach this level of formal story telling, the records must represent a "why," a plot or storyline that gives purpose to their existence as well as narrative closure, an ending that resolves the meaning inherent in the chronological ordering of the events. White paraphrases Kant to emphasize the importance given to locating this meaning: "historical narratives without analysis are empty, while historical analyses without narrative are blind" (p. 10). More succinctly, the storied ending has to constitute a conclusion of allegorical significance, a lesson to be learned. Quoting White again, "every historical narrative

has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to *moralize* the events of which it treats” (p. 18, emphasis in the original).

There lies the rub. For ultimately, the moralizing discourse, the storied plot, comes from the mind of the historiographer, not the events themselves. No matter how objectively scholars pursue their work, events do not “live,” they do not “tell” stories, they have no inherent meaning. To suggest that these events, *rather than the writer*, are the source of the moral findings is a first class reification, a subterfuge intended to make any conclusions appear more objective, more “real” than if they are acknowledged as the product of the biased human mind. As White (1980) says so eloquently,

Insofar as historical stories can be completed, can be given narrative closure, can be said to have had a *plot* all along, they give to reality the odor of the *ideal*. This is why the plot of historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as “found” in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques. (p. 24, emphasis in the original)

Lest we think this tendency is constrained to the necessarily interpretive discipline of history, the same critique can be made of much of the qualitative research in sociology and education, where patterns and themes are seen to “emerge” from a qualitative data base, a staple of “grounded theory” going back to the classic formulation by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and still prominent in the work of Strauss and Corbett (1998).

So how do we resolve our dilemma? If, on the one hand, history (or any disciplined inquiry) without narrative meaning is trivial and on the other hand, the moralizing inherent in such storytelling is always the product of the human mind (with all its biases), how are we to make “objective” sense of life’s events? How do we distinguish the worth, the credibility of the analysis, if the scholarly endeavor is subject to the same human frailties as that of the informal storyteller or personal essayist?

That is clearly a topic beyond the scope of this introductory essay. Still, the brief answer is that not all humans are equally credible and not all social commentaries are equally valid. Once human infallibility is explicitly recognized, steps can be taken to increase confidence in the quality of a given analysis. Chief among these are the rigors of methodological training, the process of peer review for grants and journals (blind to the identity of the writer), explicit precepts of the theoretical framework utilized, and the intent to be as objective as possible. The latter implies

the subjugation of private agenda to the larger good of scholarship that is both empirically grounded and theoretically consistent with attempts to understand the natural world. That brings us full circle to Schlechty and Noblitt (1982). For making the obvious obvious is less concerned with generating knowledge, and more concerned with elucidating what is only recognized implicitly. Nevertheless, even pedagogical purpose is still inherently moralizing, consistent with the *prima facie* principle that knowledge is better (a moral term) than ignorance.

Our Purpose

Farm stories are the heart of this special issue of *Southern Rural Sociology*. It is our express purpose to raise the discourse from narrative to narrativity, to impose formal analysis on the recollection of our agricultural experiences. Specifically, we hope to make explicit to our readers how the tensions of everyday life are balanced through choices that typically exist beyond our conscious awareness. Collectively the articles represent a synthesis of storytelling and pedagogy, personal essays designed to help people think expressly about disparate ways in which rural values are realized, re-envisioned, and, sometimes, rescinded.

Our purpose is to give readers a better appreciation of the essence of rural life, to probe its contradictions. What is the relationship between education and rural life? How do the ubiquitous anti-intellectual stereotypes of rural life spring from a culture that so consistently produces those who traffic in the cognitive domain? We believe our examples vivify how and why education and ideas spark change, illuminate lives, and cause positive change.

A Rationale

How do we resolve the social analyst's dilemma? If we acknowledge that the interpretations, the pedagogical lessons are *ours* and not inherent in the stories or the events we recount, how do we justify their worth? By what claim do we assert that these formalized narratives advance the knowledge base, that they provide new insights, that they constitute innovative quality discourse?

In the first place, these questions represent a standard not typically addressed explicitly. Rather, such queries are tacit to and inherent in the process of blind review for journal publication. We raise these issues because the nature of this work is so unique. In the social sciences, stories, whether farm or otherwise, rarely serve as the "data" that comprise scholarly analysis. Several points are relevant here: (a) the events of these stories occurred in the past and accurate memories are always problematic, (b) the specific events examined represent partial selection, whether

due to incomplete memory or inclusion germane to the specific moral purpose in the narrativity developed, (c) the type of analysis (examination of social tensions) is only one among several that could be utilized, and (d) the particular tension addressed in each narrative is again only one among a number that could be chosen.

By recognizing these limitations explicitly, we are forced to address White's (1980) thesis: what is the value of narrativity? Whether doing historiography or social analysis based on recollected stories, "[d]oes the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, a coherence that permits us to see 'the end' in every beginning?" (White, p. 27). In the literal sense, the answer is clearly "no." Yet metaphorically, the value of narrativity lies in its ability to help us see, to understand, to recognize the moral codes that we impute to life's passage.

It is this metaphorical sense that our narrativity explicitly addresses. Hegel has suggested historical self-consciousness—the capability of representing events as history—is possible only in terms of the legitimacy of a social system (White 1980). By extension, this self-consciousness extends to sociology, education, and other disciplines. Thus any scholarly analysis "creates the possibility of conceiving the kinds of tensions, conflicts, struggles, and their various kinds of resolutions" (White, p. 17) that are inherent in the social system, explicitly delineating the moral sense of reality that narrativity embodies.

The narrative of the personal essay represents a bridge between this formalistic moralizing and the immediacy of social life. Social systems are at once subtle and complex. Both society and organizations are filled with strains or tensions, Hegel's dialectic: people are pushed this way, pulled that, attracted to competing interests, forced to choose between evils, and despair about whether to go forward or back. Descriptions of social interaction that do not account for these dynamic forces are woefully one dimensional. Yet most people experience their lives tacitly, enmeshed in the everydayness of routines and deadlines. We are all prone to the pressures of survival that dominate our lives at the taken-for-granted level; seldom do people step back and recognize life's nuances. How often do we, social participants all, reflect directly on these forces? For that matter, how often does social science address them explicitly? Although quality writing inherently illustrates these complexities, the means to that end is seldom how to balance dynamic tensions. Further, the choice between conflicting goals is never static. As times, society, and people change, so too do their perceptions of these antagonistic pressures. Ergo, they "rebalance" again and again (Miller 1991).

These oppositional forces constitute the *raison d'être* for these articles. While each of the six essays focuses on a different tension, collectively the set elucidates the complexities, subtleties, contradictions, and dynamic forces of rural life—all through the window of education and ideas. Although the themes addressed here do not exhaust the possible ways in which people experience and make choices about their lives, they do typify and clarify these conflicts.

The narrativity embedded in these six farm stories is delivered through a purposefully novel approach. Transcending conventional scholarship, the essays combine rural experiences with formal purpose, conveying personally cathected meanings that address the complex tensions that undergird social life. We believe these articles bring a creative purpose to the traditional sense of storytelling.

Unlike the fictional work in which the purpose is to engage the reader in the story itself (“show, don’t tell”), the personal essayist glories in telling, in exploring the lessons buried in the details of human experience (Lopate 1994:xxxviii). In that sense, our work clearly falls within the realm of that genre. We hope to tell, to present a moral. However, unlike the personal essay where the mirror is typically reflected inward, the analysis focused on insights about the individual—character, personality, growth, redemption—the formalized narrative in our articles is geared more toward explicating the social realm, the rifts between rural and urban culture, the tensions inherent in the fissures between groups. Thus our scholarship represents a unique blend of informal and formal social analysis, the narrative representation of personal essays, the formalized pedagogy of narrativity, relayed through autobiographical memories.

The stories range from the authors’ youth to current issues, from American farms to Ghana cocoa plantations. In this regard, the six scholars represent considerable diversity across gender, race, and discipline (English, history, Asian and African studies, sociology, education) and have both higher education and K-12 backgrounds. Perhaps even more germane, the group has maintained ties to their rural heritage, either directly (two farm full- or part-time) or indirectly (through relatives/friends who still cultivate the land). And not surprisingly, given the extensive traditions of the rural South both historically and as depicted in the literature (e.g., Agee 1941; *Twelve Southerners* 1930), that region is well represented in these selections. All of the authors currently live and work there (or did so recently).

The Essays and Their Respective Tensions

Each of the six essays in this special issue of *Southern Rural Sociology* is based on the farm backgrounds of the respective authors. These articles represent an extension of an anthology edited by Zachary Michael Jack (2005), *Black Earth and Ivory Tower: New American Essays from Farm and Classroom*. In that work university scholars reflected on their rural heritage, a topic generally neglected in recent years. The current essays, however, depart in significant ways from Jack's collection, which constitutes primarily a literary perspective, "bittersweet auto-ethnographies that emanate a love of the land" (Kelsey 2006:¶ 3), the personal synthesis of the values of one's youth and demands of one's profession.

In contrast, the narratives assembled here, developed specifically for this issue, are more discursive and expository, more consistent with the analytic conventions of the social sciences. Their common bond is the explication of social interaction, specifically that which plays out in the changing rural milieu of the late 20th century. Each piece embodies the sense of Hegel's synthesis—the resolution of opposing theses, the delineation of the often overlooked nexus of rural and intellectual life. Through this formalized narrative technique, these farm stories are intended to generate new insights, to produce the "aha" moment, that dawning realization of the universality of culture.

The first piece, "My Garden State," by **Michele Gillespie** in the Department of History at Wake Forest University, examines explicitly the tension between rural upbringing and formal thought patterns of the university. Specifically, how do memories of lived experience on the farm contribute both to our common core of American values and to one's development as a scholar? And how does that formal training challenge the idealized images of our agrarian heritage, especially when viewed through the lenses of gender and race?

In the second article, "'Dirt Farmer' vs. 'Soil Scientist': Representative Tensions in the Constructed Identities of Farmer-Writers Walter Thomas Jack and Edward H. Faulkner," **Zachary Michael Jack** in the Department of English at North Central College, similarly investigates the dynamic between rural insider and professional outsider. Jack reconstructs the no-till debate (to plow or not to plow) that graced the literary pages during World War II. Although the media portrayed this as the pragmatic farmer versus the scientific expert, both protagonists were in fact educated practitioners. Neither was "of" the formal university/agricultural research paradigm nor the eastern literary establishment that framed the debate to their own ends.

Francis Danquah in the Department of History at Southern University and **Stephen Miller** in the Department of Leadership, Foundations, and Human

Resource Education at the University of Louisville provide yet another window into how different world-views can influence one's understanding of culture. Their essay, "Cocoa Farming in Ghana: Emic Experience, Etic Interpretation," exemplifies the power of ideas to change perceptions. Rural life on the cocoa farms is relayed through Professor Danquah's eyes as an urban youth with strong family ties to the farmstead. Later, while studying in Great Britain, he discovered several pieces on Southeast Asian history about the exploitation of peasants and migrant labor. As these ideas penetrated his innocence, he suddenly recognized the similarities of these economic systems to his own country, now viewed from beyond the personal. His new insight represented a cross cultural, scientific etic perspective rather than an insider's emic lens.

The individual's orientation to society through primary group or secondary affiliation—local versus cosmopolitan—yields another clue to personal identity and mode of thought. In "A Life Lost: The Tensions between Local Attachments and Cosmopolitan Attractions," **E Carolyn Tucker**, a retired teacher now on the Board of Education of the Webster County (KY) Schools, explores the pull of home (primarily rural) against the lure of the outside (primarily urban). What brings some individuals to remain tied so closely to their communities, while others seem able to transcend the immediacy of family and place to take on values from the larger society? Why do some give greater credence to family and kin while others come to favor sources secondary to their upbringing? And why do these accommodations seem to be so difficult, even tragic sometimes?

The last two articles shift from exploring the dynamics of different interpretive frameworks (*how* we think) to an emphasis on products (*what* comes of these thought patterns). In "A Whistling Girl and a Crowing Hen: Changing Productivity and Gender Expectations," **Cynthia Resor**, Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Eastern Kentucky University, develops the tension between the "real" by-products of the farm and the more "nebulous" ideas that represent productivity in the university. Illustrating this conflict by recounting her struggles to complete a dissertation in medieval history, she also explores the subordination of females in traditional gender roles among both farmers and historians.

Finally, **Stephen Miller**, in "John Deere Tractors and School Reform: Balancing Economies of Scale and Quality of Life," debunks the myth of today's failing schools. It is widely believed that our schools have fallen from a state of grace (the Golden Age when the curriculum was rigorous and everybody learned). If we could but restore the standards of the forties and fifties, say the critics, everything would be fine. The fallacy of this reasoning is seen in the demise of the two-cylinder John

Deere motor. As family farms disappeared and the acreage of those remaining grew larger, the improvements engineered into frequent model upgrades could not keep pace with the demand for more power. By 1961, John Deere had to replace the old motor with the new 4010 series four and six cylinder power plants. Similarly, schools have gotten “bigger” (higher expectations) in response to the demands of the global markets of the information age. In contrast to the so-called golden years, we now want *all* groups, not just elites, to receive a good education. Today’s schools have made progress toward that goal although these reforms are still a work in progress. Yet the economies of scale which drive both technological change and school reform can have negative effects. Can these efficiencies be balanced against human values and quality of life?

A Final Prologue

The cultural divide between the farm and the university can be thought of as a modern instance of C.P. Snow’s (1963) classic piece, *The Two Cultures*, in which he described the differing values and knowledge base in the humanities and the sciences, a gulf that led both sides to misunderstand the other, with the resulting loss of useful perspective to both groups. Snow’s work was intended to increase awareness, debate, and cross-fertilization between the two isolated subcultures.

The cultural divide between farm and university, while similar in many ways, has a distinctive cast. The university has become a universal institution. While not everyone goes to postsecondary education, the educated class most certainly does: our leaders at all levels are college graduates. Even workers who do not attend the university are affected; their superiors inevitably reflect what Egan (1997) calls the “educated mind,” while postsecondary technical education, clearly shaped by the university, is increasingly an expectation for all facets of society. In contrast, the rural life is becoming marginalized as agricultural production depends on fewer and fewer workers and as mammoth corporate entities replace the family farm.

Our experiences convince us that the gap can be bridged. Very few Americans today have any direct nexus with the farm. Yet students identify with farm anecdotes intellectually because the analogies help explicate sometimes difficult material. They also respond emotionally. Stories personalize content, helping us construct knowledge, layered onto our existing values and information base. Although what occurs here varies according to an individual’s background, one constant is our rural heritage, mediated through relatives and history if not actual experience. Yet there may be more to this appeal than this. Perhaps there also exists

a primitive, visceral connection to the land that embodies the old Native American maxim, “We are one with the earth.”

It would be a tragic loss if our rural cultural heritage disappeared. All Americans do and will continue to depend on the economic productivity of the farm. Furthermore, rural values constitute the bedrock of American folkways and mores. Yet today more and more Americans have little awareness of these traditions. We have chosen to address this gap by casting farm experiences through the universal medium of storytelling. Stories are naturally entertaining: the narrative device captures attention, vivifies details, interweaves action with character, promotes identification, and enhances memory.

Beyond narrative, the formalized moralizing of narrativity offers a means of incorporating the lessons of our rural heritage into both scholarship and public debate. Collectively, our narratives are intended to educate, to demonstrate how the power of ideas can make explicit the tensions that underlie rural life. Beyond this primary purpose, the reader may note a considerable overlap in the morals embedded in these essays, tacitly expressed through our experiences: the need for moderation, a preference for both/and over either/or dichotomies, equity for all groups, an emphasis on education, the primacy of place, and the need to balance economic efficiency with quality of life.

Finally, we hope our audience finds our storytelling both enjoyable and instructive. May your reading bring both narrative pleasure and the insights of narrativity.

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