10

Close Relationships

The term "close relationships" has traditionally referred to marriages and families (see Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000). There are narratives about types of marriages and families as well as stories about matters within them. Accounts of dysfunctional families, for example, present the shape and sentiments of troubled domestic life. Families also are settings for stories about kinship and identity, such as the character of children, parenthood, filial loyalty, and intergenerational solidarity. When we move into the field in this chapter, we consider how storytelling about marriage constructs the social form, as well as how narratives about particular families relate to how members view themselves and their world.

Orienting to Close Relationships

Metaphors implicating family are legion. As symbolic as they may seem, however, they affect our understanding of family life and lead researchers to view related aspects of domesticity in distinctive ways (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1994). The characterization of the family as a "shelter from the storm," for example, signals different narrative terrain than does the characterization of the "Manson family." Compositionally and performatively, each not only deploys distinctive contexts for storying family life, but also differentially orients those concerned to domestic matters.

Consider how the use of a particular metaphor can lead researchers to focus in a specific way on family stories. (See Rosenblatt, 1994, for a more

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comprehensive view of the use of family metaphors.) Using the "family dance" metaphor, William Marsiglio and Ramon Hinojosa (2006) point to the importance of choreographic adaptation to routine patterns of interaction for the adjustment of new members in "blended families," stepfathers in particular. They ask, how do new stepfathers relate to familial routines that are not their own? What can their accounts tell us about this? The stepfathers interviewed for Marsiglio and Hinojosa's study feature diverse issues related to what, in some instances, is actually called "stepping in," "keeping in step," and other rhythmic terms for describing stepfathers' adaptation to new circumstances. For stepfathers, the families they are entering are made up of girlfriends, new wives, and others' children. Issues of how to adjust and be accepted unfold choreographically, which is apparent in stepfathers' stories.

Rather than addressing the stepfather's relation to a new family environment in terms of stressors, role strain, or similar research contrivances, Marsiglio and Hinojosa call attention to everyday narrative articulations of "getting in step." Their concern is with how stepfathers frame adjustment issues in their own terms, the accounts of which are signally metaphorical.

> The metaphor [family dance] calls attention to timing and the choreographic dimensions of the stepfather's relationship with other family members, who commonly dance to different tunes as each adjusts to their life together. [Referring to stepfathers' accounts] Some stepfathers seem to have two left feet, figuratively speaking, as they join in and adapt or fail to adapt to domestic routines. Others get right into the swing of things. The family dance initially turns the stepfather's actions and other family members' responses into improvisations, the timing and paces of which may or may not settle into a mutually satisfying routine. Initially, the stepfather's dance is especially ad hoc since he is new on the scene and has to figure out how to get in step with all the others. (pp. 178–179)

The stepfather's story shapes the issues for him. In turn, such stories fuel the emerging experiential understanding of domestic life. In narrative practice, stories reflexively mediate close relationships. Equally significant is that, by calling attention to families as storied environments, the authors inform us that even the smallest or most intimate social context is narratively framed and understood (see Rosenblatt, 2006). Stepfathers' stories are not all organizationally sanctioned nor are they likely to become broadly emulated discourses. But they do figure in constructing who one is as a stepfather, one's developing status in the unfolding narratives of stepfathering, and why one is or is not becoming part of family life. Stories not only give meaning to close relationships, but provide explanation and direction for action—in this most intimate of social spaces. This suggests the first guideline:

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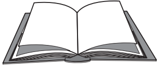

Figure that even the smallest and most fleeting of relationships can be viewed as narrative environments. Orient to and take note of the ways these relationships are characterized in accounts of their organization, paying attention to the linkages drawn between their overall characterization and particular elements within and outside of them.

Narrative environments are discernible social forces in their own right in shaping participants' identities, courses of action, and relationships with outsiders. This does not mean that they determine identity or action. Rather, their varied presence in people's lives prompts them to take the environments into account in some way in conveying who and what they are, and explain why they act the way they do. Narrative environments, in other words, are not just storied, providing grist for entertainment or cultural analysis. Rather, they are properly viewed as going concerns, useful mechanisms of conduct, and sources of moral invocation. They offer distinguishable stocks of accounts for experience (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Families are narrative resources as much as they condition behavior and actions that are contemplated for the future (J. F. Gubrium & Holstein, 1990).

This is Elizabeth Stone's (1988) point in discussing "how our family stories shape us," which is the subtitle of her book *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins*. The book relates to Bauman's concern with the performativity of storytelling (see Chapter 7), the lesson of which is that what is communicated simultaneously shapes us behaviorally. If stories about marriages and families are told for various purposes, these stories take on lives of their own, so to speak. Narratives return to storytellers as part of the ever-changing context for continuing talk and interaction. In relation to the many stories surrounding her own extended family life, Stone explains, "These stories seemed at once to sponsor and mirror our aspirations as a family" (p. 6). The accounts mirrored or reflected her family's sense of who they were and the meaning of events in their lives over several generations.

Stone describes different ways family stories function as narrative environments, many of them metaphorically. One is in terms of what psychiatrist Antonio Ferreira (1963) calls "family myths," which he defines as "beliefs shared by all family members, concerning each other and their mutual position in the family life" (quoted in Stone, p. 102). For example, the belief and continuing assertion that a particular member of the family is "the bad one," another member is "the sickly one," and still another "the smart one" has moral horizons for all concerned, both those so labeled and the others who interact with them. One parent or a particular sibling may be the one "you can count on" or, on the other hand, the one "you can never trust to follow

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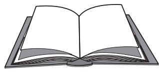
through," which affects both their views of themselves and views of them. These are also the basis of explanations for why they act as they do and how they are treated. Related stories are recounted widely in the family circle, shaping assigned responsibilities, expectations about behavior, and the overall division of labor inside and outside the household.

Other myths are embedded in stories about whole families or even types of families. They, too, shape attitudes and behavior. Widely circulating stories about particular immigrant, rich or poor, celebrity, or criminal families, for example, construct environments in which both members and nonmembers organize their thoughts and sentiments about lifestyles, identity, and moral worth. This provides a second guideline:


Guideline

Treat stories of close relationships as narratives of explanation and causality for domestic talk and interaction. Consider the ways that members and outsiders use these accounts to construct environments that explain, justify, or otherwise offer understandings of their own and others' conduct.

As we cautioned in Chapter 6, it is important not to overemphasize the homogeneity of narratives for any social form. While there may be black sheep and kissing cousins, family members do not necessarily all figure accounts in the same way, as the terms "family myth" or "family dance" might imply. In this regard, it is useful analytically to orient as well to the social distribution of metaphors and accounts. If we approach family stories in terms of how they accountably shape lives, we also can ask how widespread and varied they are in their application.

Susan Walzer's (2006) research on family differences regarding divorcing couples is instructive and leads to a third guideline. Walzer is especially interested in how children make sense of divorce, arguing that they are far from being narrative wallflowers in the divorce process. They do, indeed, have thoughts of their own about the whys and wherefores of the matter. They develop stories of their own that account for why their parents' marriages are less than ideal, why they eventually failed, and what might have been done to make things better. Walzer's narrative material shows that children's accounts do not simply reflect their parents' or other adult opinion. In William Corsaro's (1997, p. 18) words, children do "not simply internalize society and culture, but are actively contributing to cultural production and change," in this case as they make sense of divorce.

This subverts the idea that there is "a" family story, or "a" shared view of a particular family member, or "a" legendary rendering of a momentous family event. If there are family myths, the pertinent questions are how

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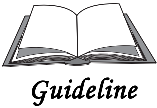
widely and successfully are they applied? This also works against the assumption that every close relationship has its unique story. The question instead is how is uniqueness invoked in everyday talk and interaction? There actually may be a set of accounts that praise an event such as a marriage or even a divorce, and this is passed on for generations. There also may be another set of accounts that, alongside this, denigrate the event, likewise being passed on for generations.

In researching children's stories of divorce, Walzer found that the children she interviewed composed their accounts from various sources. They took on board what they knew from experience, from parents' and others' accounts, and combined these into stories of their own. They were active storytellers to be sure, but they did not fully invent the linkages they made, the plotlines they formed, or the themes they stressed. In short, they were "interpretively reproductive" as accountable members of their environments (Corsaro, 1997), composing stories of their own while borrowing from others' accounts. According to Walzer, "This reflects their ability to engage in active interpretation of their experiences in ways that both embrace and diverge from adult accounts" (p. 174). This leads to our third guideline:



Do not assume that the smallness or intimacy of close relationships generates homogenous or all-consuming narratives. Whether stories are communicated by insiders or outsiders, consider the accountable positions and the stakes of storytelling that can foster narrative differences.

Into the Field

We enter the field of close relationships by raising two analytic questions. First, how shall we think about close relationships as narrative environments? We discuss Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner's (1970) classic essay on the social construction of marriage to address this question. In the process and following the third guideline, we reflect critically on its homogenizing tendencies. Second, what comes into view when we turn to conditions that diversify storytelling? Here, we discuss Annette Lareau's (2003) work on childhood socialization, and examine the narrative distinctions that play out in family talk and interaction when differences in class and race are taken into account.

Berger and Kellner's essay on marriage followed on the heels of the publication of Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1966) seminal book on the social construction of reality. While the essay does not take us into an actual empirical

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field, it does provide analytic leverage for how to view what transpires narratively in marital relationships. (See J. F. Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; J. F. Gubrium & Lynott, 1985; and Harris, 2006, for a related framing of family discourse.) The process Berger and Kellner call "*nomos*-building"—the construction of a distinctive reality—is presented as general to the narrative formation of close relationships. Berger and Kellner describe reality-constructing processes that shape relationships well beyond the domestic sphere. As they note, "Marriage is obviously only *one* social relationship in which this process of *nomos*-building takes place. It is therefore necessary to look first in more general terms at the character of this process" (pp. 50–51).

Following a general discussion, they ask how *nomos*-building plays out in marriage. First, the *nomos*—the social form that is built up in the construction process—is referenced and experienced as a reality standing over and above the individuals that make it up. The *nomos* of marriage is the phenomenological object that partners reference when they speak of who "we" or "they" are as a married couple. This is separate and distinct from who each partner is, was, or will be as an individual. When partners refer to who "we" are as a married couple, they draw upon narrative resources for elaborating a story over and above their individual experiences of the relationship, producing a narrative of a distinctive kind of marriage. When a recently married couple, for example, refers to themselves as "newlyweds," it places the relationship into a distinct category of narratives of experience separate from other types of relationships and marriages.

None of this is automatic. Berger and Kellner view *nomos*-building as a practical matter, developing out of the ongoing conversation between marital partners. The *nomos* is a narratively constructed entity. The marital partners might eventually typify who they are as a couple in terms of the kind of marriage they hope to have, or the kind of married couple they expect not to be. They might make use of more or less well-known exemplars of good and bad marriages in the process. But until such narrative resources are put to use in constructing their marriage, the marital relationship is simply a relationship (you and me, say) without a meaningful and moral horizon of its own (the sort of couple we are; the kind of marriage we have). Regardless of where the process is at a particular moment in time, the *nomos* continues to unfold in the ongoing marital conversation. Once formed, it is a referential and narrative entity that occupies a distinct space, separate from the biographies and identities of individual partners, other marriages, and other close relationships. Still, once the *nomos* is formed, it does not necessarily mean that the story has been completed. To apply a cliché, marriage and other close relationships are a continuing story, distinctive as they might be as social forms at any point in time.

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Berger and Kellner use the metaphor of a "little world" to describe what is built up through the marital conversation. Emphasis is on the plenitude of the *nomos*. It is not just a categorically distinct entity, but something that provides a complete narrative context—a world—for the partners to orient to as a marriage. The *nomos* offers a broad understanding of the partners' ongoing sense of their relationship and defines who and what they are together as husband and wife. The *nomos* is a living story, of course, not just "the" story. It is not only communicated, but acts back, as it were, to shape attitudes, sentiments, and courses of action. Just as Stone (1988) writes of "how our family stories shape us," Berger and Kellner view the reality constructed as part and parcel of the unfolding experience of marriage, echoing McAdams's (1993) view that close relationships in this case *are* their developing stories.

Berger and Kellner do not provide empirical grounding in actual storytelling, but they do offer narrative perspective. So how does the researcher proceed empirically? Our guidelines recommend that the researcher listen and record the accounts couples, for example, communicate about their marriage through time, whether they are articulated in multiple interviews, in focus groups, in therapy sessions for troubled marriages, or in the ordinary banter of family life that fieldwork in households would provide. The researcher might listen in particular for narratives surrounding categorical distinctions, such as the respective accounts that follow references to "I" or "you," as opposed to "we," "us," and "them." Temporal references are equally telling, such as "us then" as opposed to "us now." (See Ricoeur, 1984, for philosophical bearing and Riessman, 1990; Harris, 2006; and Hopper, 1993, 2001, for empirical examples.)

It is important not to dismiss such talk as simply references in speech that cover or hide a more basic reality. As we discussed in Part I, talk and interaction, linkage, composition, and other meaning-making processes are part of the narrative work of *nomos*-building, not communicative conduits to a *nomos*. One might hypothesize, for example, that, as a couple speaks about themselves, if there are a great number of stories about "I" and "you," the narrative and experiential distinctiveness of the marriage might differ from the *nomos* constructed out of stories about "us." We are not suggesting that one or the other is preferable, as one might in a therapeutic vein, but only that one should take note of such differences in analyzing the narrative status of the *nomos* or, in this case, the close relationship in question.

More than two decades after the publication of Berger and Kellner's essay, Norbert Wiley (1985) revisited its thesis and found its view of the *nomos* overly homogenized. Marriages, he argued, were disintegrating and the times were not as partial to single-story views of any relationship, let

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alone marriage. Wiley heeds our third guideline, resisting the tendency in Berger and Kellner's analysis to see the marital story as a developing whole, unchallenged from within or from without. To be sure, Berger and Kellner consider the marital conversation in relation to the broader context of conversations about marriage. But, in their view, the narrative input from the varied sources constructively combine to form "a" marriage or "the" marriage the couple come to be. Their focus on how to think about the formation of "a" phenomenological object such as marriage understandably orients them to "the" entity under consideration.

On the contrary, Wiley suggests that, while extremely insightful, Berger and Kellner's view is grounded in middle-class sensibilities and is a product of its era. Its metaphorical status as a narrative resource has been supplanted by a struggle that relates less to a "little world" than to the shifting domestic winds of the world at large. Wiley points out that the current narrative environment of marriage and family life is more complicated and contested, even while its shared narrativity remains. In other words, a different metaphorical structure is now in order.

> Berger and Kellner's world is long gone, and the tacit assumptions of their [essay] are now the wrong ones. People are still hammering out that main reality in primary group settings. Lovers, couples and married still face each other and stitch together some kind of world. But the larger world has changed and family worlds have changed with it. The marital conversation is more struggle and less chitchat than in Berger and Kellner's base period. (p. 23)

Wiley's critique is worth quoting at length, because it not only provides analytic direction for entertaining a more complex view of this environment, but leads us to the second question we raised in moving into the field. That question points to the conditions that diversify the storytelling of close relationships.

> [Berger and Kellner's essay] is extremely insightful, opening up the inner world of the family and its symbolic culture as few others have done. This is the middle class family to be sure: highly verbal, possessed of a rich vocabulary of emotion-talk, and mobilized to make use of every social opportunity. Making sense of everyday, socio-emotional life is especially important for these couples, for they live off the world of interaction and symbolism. Meanings are particularly important for the white collar group, both in work and in family life. But even if the Berger-Kellner family is unusually talkative and sharp-eyed, their stance is merely intensification of what goes on in all modern families. (p. 22)

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This observation brings us to Annette Lareau's (2003) work on the narratives of "unequal childhoods." Her interviews with working-class and middle-class families and her research team's fieldwork in their homes indicate that inequality plays out in contrasting narrative repertoires that cut across race. The focus of Lareau's study was the communicative organization of childhood socialization. Regarding homogenization, it is clear from Lareau's interview material that class makes a difference in how parents speak about their children's upbringing as well as in how children story their world. The difference also appears in parents' conversations with their children outside of the interview context. Lareau describes the mediations of class in summarizing her study (our annotation in brackets).

> This book identifies the largely invisible [not inaudible] but powerful ways that parents' social class impacts children's life experiences. It shows, using in-depth observations and interviews with middle-class (including members from the upper-middle-class), working-class, and poor families, that inequality permeates the fabric of the culture. In the chapters that lie ahead, I report the results of intensive observational research for a total of twelve families when their children were nine and ten years old. I argue that key elements of family cohere to form a cultural [and narrative] logic of child rearing. In other words, the differences among families seem to cluster together in meaningful patterns. (p. 3)

Family relations and class-based sensibilities permeate the very fabric of everyday talk and interaction. As Lareau puts it, they can be heard at the narrative interstices of ordinary activities such as doing schoolwork and getting ready for basketball practice. Family background and class are not just a matter of advantage and disadvantage, but provide impetus for storying everyday life, in this case as it relates to the challenges of children coming of age and being a parent dealing with growing sons and daughters. In listening to parent–child communication, Lareau and her team take notice of distinctive patterns of meaning making that vary by class. In so doing, they literally hear the narrative work of linkage, composition, and performance play out in the process. The "key elements that cohere" are not so much visible in behavior, as they are present in the heard but unremarkable accounts that articulate and frame talk and interaction in these close relationships.

Family and class differences cohere around distinctive ways of speaking and making meaning. If class reflects differences in terms of socioeconomic background, neighborhood location, available monetary resources, and material advantage, it works at a narrative level to speak the terminology

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and categorical preferences of daily life. Differences in family composition and history operate similarly. The accounts and accountability of children and adults across narrative environments diversify the family *nomos*. Middle-class and working-class families contrast in myriad ways, in understandings of children's lives especially in relation to recreation and schooling, ambition, and achievement.

Lareau identifies two repertoires of upbringing, whose metaphorical resonances are loud and clear. One informs the performative style of the middle-class family. In these households, parents orient to their children's upbringing in terms of what Lareau calls "concerted cultivation." The words signal active participation in children's lives. Stories feature parents as virtually planting the seeds for childhood development and, following that, providing extensive stage directions. Parents are the active interlocutors of their children's lives, and, if they are not, they unwittingly script the children's inner lives and social worlds. At the very least, parents provide supervised opportunities for children to organize activities on their own.

Children's identities in such families are amazingly audible. From accounts of children's intelligence and athletic skill, to the continuous articulation of children's motives and purposes, narratives of concerted cultivation produce detailed renditions of children's hopes and desires, attitudes and achievements. Lareau found that, day in and day out in middle-class households, parents were part and parcel of nearly all accounts of their children's conduct. Listen for select features of this repertoire in the following extracts from the middle-class family accounts presented in Lareau's book. In the first extract, Don Tallinger describes one of his sons, fourth-grader Garrett, who is "a tall, thin, serious boy with blond hair."

> He's shy and quiet, not very outgoing when you first meet him. But he's got a fierce desire to please, so he's very compliant. But he is also still very competitive. He likes to win, but he's still easy to manage. (p. 41)

Like other middle-class parents, the sheer volume of activities the Tallingers schedule for their three sons means that concerted cultivation must be coordinated and scheduled. This turns daily narratives of accommodation into a matter of time management. Four-year-old Sam, the youngest, "is already aware of the importance of the family calendar." He knows that his older brothers' commitments may preempt an invitation to a birthday party. The concerted workings of the calendar are evident in the following exchange between Sam and his mother Louise. It's early May at the time.

> [Louise] says, "I know we have to be somewhere on the eleventh. If we are home in the morning, you can go to this." . . . Louise walks over to the calendar and

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> flips ahead to June. She looks at the calendar for a moment. Sam asks hopefully, with a trace of concern, "Can I go to it?" Louise says, "You're in luck; we're home in the morning." (p. 44)

The next extract is an exchange between Don and a field-worker. In this case, it points to the concerted rationalization of his sons' athletic skills. As a narrative environment centered on the detailed scheduling of leisure time, the children within it have been precisely located in the daily scheme of things, which, by the way, also figure their identities. A family myth seems to be written all over the conversation. The myth hints at narrative control, the everyday elements of which provide preferences and direction, clueing us to the constructive power of accounts.

Don: We struggle with Spencer 'cause he doesn't like sports. We decided he's average. Louise and I decided. But when they [the sons] ask, "What can we do?" I say go out and play catch. I usually don't think of going and collecting spiders or doing something that Spencer would like. He's interested in science. I usually don't think about that.

Fieldworker: That's hard.

Don: Sports just comes naturally to us.

Fieldworker: Does Spencer try to compete with Garrett?

Don: He knows he couldn't compete with him. Garrett is so much better. (p. 55)

The second repertoire for upbringing is associated with working-class families and constructs the cast of characters differently. Parents are not as center stage in these family's accounts as parents are in the middle-class family environment. Storytelling about children's upbringing is told with parents situated at a distance from children's activities. Parents are not as concertedly involved in the children's lives, but they do take pride when the children deal with life's hurdles on their own. This is true of both the white and black working-class families. Here is how Lareau introduces the upbringing of 9-year-old Tyrec Taylor.

> For nine-year-old Tyrec Taylor, organized activities were an interruption. In contrast to Garrett Taylor, Tyrec centered his life on informal play with a group of boys from this Black, working-class neighborhood. Aside from going to school and to summer day camp, Tyrec took part in only two organized activities: he went to Sunday school periodically throughout the year and to Vacation Bible School in the summer. In fourth grade, he pleaded with his

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> mother for permission to play on a community football team that he learned about through a friend. . . . Ms. Taylor found the experience taxing and she "pray[ed] that we don't have to do it again." (p. 66)

Lareau calls this narrative repertoire "the accomplishment of natural growth." In contrast with the "concerted" part of the middle-class family repertoire, the "accomplishment" part of this repertoire does not refer to parents. Instead, it flags what working-class children do on their own. The subject at the center of these upbringing narratives is, at once, more responsible for coming of age and less linked to parents as central characters in their stories. The idea is that children naturally grow up, even while they grow up in families. Children face the challenges that come with the territory, more or less on their own. As if to say, let nature take its course, family stories of children coming of age in working-class households feature children removed from the parental scripting of their lives.

In the contrasting narrative environments of these families, children are different sorts of subjects. While middle-class mothers and fathers repeatedly produce scripts of parental responsibility for their children's success and well-being, the working-class family's narrative environment promotes stories of children coming of age by getting through life on their own. The moral horizons of the two narrative environments differ dramatically. If middle-class parents blame themselves for their children's failures and personally bask in their successes, working-class parents, black and white, take pride in what children achieve by themselves. In this regard, consider Ms. Taylor's responses to questions about the place of sports in Tyrec's development. The child remains central to the story's theme of personal accountability, even as his mother is prompted to include other factors.

> Unlike middle-class parents, however, Ms. Taylor didn't see Tyrec's football experience as crucial to his overall development. "I don't know how it's helped him," was her reply to the question "Are there any ways that you think it has helped him in other aspects of his life . . . Even in little ways?" Ms. Taylor's first and most decisive point was that she could not think of any way that it helped him. When asked "Were there any spillover effects that you didn't expect—in some other areas of his life?" she generated this answer:
>
> "Well, just the responsibility part, knowing that [mimicking Tyrec] this is what I have to do and this is what I'm gonna do. They give him a routine of his very own: I have to do this and then I have to do my homework and then I have to eat, you know. So I thought that was good." (p. 79)

Lareau views these contrasting family narratives as operating reflexively in children's upbringing. Don and Louise Garrett and other middle-class

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parents blame themselves as much as the children for the children's growth and development. Ms. Taylor and other working-class parents account for their children's accomplishments with stories of the children's personal responsibility for getting through or not getting through life. True to the family tales, childrearing and coming of age both reflect and provide the basis for their narrative accounts.

Conclusion

If we figure that the smallest of social contexts are narrative environments, the analytic task is to discern patterns of similarity and difference within and across them. The important thing to keep in mind is that narrative work is as much at stake in the production of similarity and difference in these environments, as in larger, more formally organized settings. Listen, observe, and take systematic note of the ways participants in close relationships construct who and what they are, especially as this varies in time and social space. This is of special importance for close relationships, as these are so often viewed as homogenous in their storytelling. Orienting to close relationships and their accounts as embedded in members' perspectives and their varied narratives can tell us a different story.