Title: Reasoning Together through Telling Stories: How People Talk about Social Controversies

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Abstract We use focus groups of ordinary citizens talking about social controversies to analyze the role of storytelling in collective reasoning. Prior research has emphasized storytelling and abstract reasons as distinct rhetorical forms, and elaborated on how they function differently in group deliberation. But we find that people often combine the telling of stories and the articulation of abstract principles as they reason together about controversial issues. We extend prior research by showing how storytelling can foster collective reasoning and how people combine telling stories and stating abstract principles to create morally complex understandings of concrete courses of action. We complicate earlier research by showing that, in some group settings, stories are treated as legitimate justifications for the speaker's preferences and are not used disproportionately by more marginal group members. Our research emphasizes the constitutive role that storytelling can play in collective reasoning by highlighting the interplay of stories and abstract principles and the way that stories themselves can function as a form of reason-giving.

Keywords: storytelling; collective reasoning; social controversies; focus groups; vignettes

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How do people reason together about complex and controversial social issues? Research that focuses on social movement leaders, policy-makers, and legal battles (e.g. Binder 2004; Evans 2002; Kidd 2012) shows how elites develop coherent and oppositional ideological frames that can lead to a "culture war" (Hunter 1991). However, when non-elites talk about social and political issues in face-to-face settings, researchers often find shared cultural frames that bridge social and political divisions, even when the issues are controversial ones, (Ginsberg 1998; Massengill 2008) and a pragmatic and consensus-oriented approach to decision-making that acknowledges both moral and practical complexity (Evans 2010; Ginsberg 1998). It is useful to establish that the culture wars framework is not sufficient for characterizing how ordinary Americans understand social controversies. But more research is needed to help us understand the cultural frames that people in this "vast middle" do use to make sense of complex and controversial social issues. We set out to analyze how ordinary people talk about social controversies in small group settings. We conducted 36 focus groups, with pre- and post-group interviews with selected participants; we presented focus group participants with one of three vignettes describing three different controversial issues, including ones that are not standard hot-button "culture wars" issues.[1]

As we began our analysis of the group conversations, we were struck by the predominance of storytelling. We sought to understand the work stories perform when groups deliberate about complex issues. While political theorists caution that storytelling in deliberative settings can introduce bias and otherwise subvert rational debate, sociologists have recognized that storytelling can play a role in fostering "good" deliberation—deliberation that is both rational and moral, and inclusive of a wide range of views and persons (Gamson 2002, 1991; Perrin 2006; Polletta and Lee 2006). Drawing on the deliberative democracy literature, sociologists often compare and contrast the distinctive roles that storytelling (narrating a personal and concrete set of events) and reason-giving (stating an abstract principle) play in small-group deliberation (e.g. Polletta and Lee 2006). Both sides of this debate focus on deliberation in democratic settings which are relatively

free from heavy-handed state intervention, and where at least the potential for wide social participation in reasoned and un-coerced debate is assumed (Habermas 1984).

We focus on how group participants combine the telling of stories and the articulation of abstract principles as they reason together about controversial social issues, and in doing so, we elaborate and extend sociological research on storytelling and deliberation in democratic settings in four ways. First, we find that storytelling sometimes becomes a collaborative activity used in conjunction with the articulation of abstract principles in order to choose the most relevant abstract principle from a range of voiced alternatives. Second, storytelling can help group participants reason together about the practical and moral implications of implementing concrete actions based on specific abstract principles. Third, we find that sometimes reason-giving itself takes the form of telling a story (not articulating an abstract principle), and that other group members can find this use of stories to be legitimate and even compelling. Fourth, and in contrast to other research, we show that storytelling is not always a strategy used disproportionately by marginal group members; rather, storytelling spanned race, class, and gender differences in our groups, and was frequently used by privileged group members.

Our research suggests that by focusing on the distinctiveness of storytelling and reason-giving as rhetorical forms, and equating the latter with the stating of an abstract principle, researchers may be missing how people combine stories and principles as they engage in two forms of collective reasoning alluded to in other research (Perrin 2006; Polletta and Lee 2006). The first we call **exploratory reasoning**, or interactions in which group members individually and collectively explore and discuss the issues at hand, the principles at stake, the stakeholders, and the possible courses of action. The second we call **justificatory reasoning**, or interactions in which group members attempt to persuade or convince others of the relevance of a particular abstract principle or to support a specific policy preference or collective decision. In our focus groups, people combined stories and abstract principles as they engaged in both kinds of collective reasoning, and in doing so, their discussion of complex and controversial public issues became

more morally complex and more sensitive to a range of practical and moral implications of any given course of action. The propensity to use stories to talk about social controversies may help to explain why ordinary people in face-to-face settings can get beyond the "culture war" to acknowledge moral complexity and foster pragmatic compromise.

Narrative and Collective Reasoning

Over the last two decades, narrative has emerged as a major topic of inquiry within sociology (see Abell 2004 and Polletta et al. 2011 for comprehensive overviews). Sociologists have turned to narrative to theorize and research diverse topics such as identity (Black 2009; Braunstein 2012; DeGloma 2010; Ezzy 2005; Loeske 2007; Smith and Sparkes 2008; Somers 1994), social movements and political action (Gamson 1992; 2001; Polletta 1998; Tilly 2002), policy legitimization (Jacobs and Sobieraj 2007), political conflict and war (Smith 2005), nationalism and the democratic imaginary (Calhoun 1993; Perrin 2006), religion (Ammerman 2003; Wuthnow 2007; Yamane 2000), organizations (Czarniawska 1998) and knowledge (Ainsworth and Hardy 2012; Polkinghorne 1988; Williams 2000). Narrative is now understood as a central cultural resource through which social actors interpret, navigate, and (re)constitute the social world (Alexander 1993; cf. Somers and Gibson 1994).

We situate our research within this broader narrative turn, asking what role stories play in how everyday citizens think and talk about social controversies. In the deliberative democracy literature, political theorists have developed normative theories that uphold the articulation of abstract principles—generally referred to as "reason-giving" or "abstract reason-giving"—as the most appropriate rhetorical form for democratic deliberation (Bohman 1996; Cohen 1989; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Habermas 1984; Lynch 2012; Rawls 1971). By appealing to abstract reasons (e.g., "equality," "freedom," etc.) to justify one's stance and persuade others, the argument goes, deliberative speech becomes truly democratic, open to rational debate, and more

than mere opinion (Schneiderhan and Khan 2008). This argument has been criticized on normative grounds for ignoring the biases that can be elided by the voicing of ostensibly universal principles (Delgado 1989; Fraser 1991; Gamson 2001; Murphy 1993; Sanders 1997; Young 2000). It has also been criticized for ignoring privilege. Women, people of color, immigrants, the working class, and members of other disadvantaged groups are less likely to engage in abstract reason-giving—and less likely to be taken as giving good reasons when they do (Ewick and Silbey 2003). Storytelling, it has been argued, can balance the scales, letting the less powerful express their own experiences (Bickford 1996; Mansbridge 1999; Young 1996, 2000). Of course, those defending the centrality and legitimacy of abstract reasoning argue that stories may exacerbate perceptions of difference and inhibit deliberation instead of encouraging it (Dryzek 2000; Miller 2002).

While sociologists view the telling of stories and the giving of abstract reasons as distinct rhetorical forms, they understand both as constitutive of the larger process of collective reasoning—the coordination of thinking by two or more people for a shared purpose of achieving a specific, desired, and justifiable result (Moshman and Greil 1998). The introduction of personal, moral, and emotional concerns is not orthogonal to processes of abstract, rational forms of thought, but constitutive of these processes (Damasio 1994). Narratives organize and order information, convey emotion, and trigger identification all at the same time, allowing them to play a crucial role in translating abstract reasons into motivations for action and for arriving, in a group, at a shared evaluative stance; they are integral to the process of reasoning (Alexander 2003; Cerulo 1998; Wuthnow 2007).

Sociologists have attempted to empirically assess what narratives "do" when groups get together to talk about social issues. While it does not seek to weigh in on normative debates about appropriate forms of reasoning, this research does concern itself with what is good for democracy, understood as what conditions foster wide-ranging and inclusive public debate of important social issues. This research maintains the distinction between the telling of stories and the giving of reasons as distinct rhetorical forms, and views "reasons" as abstract principles or values;

sociologists have analyzed how people use both forms of rhetoric in group-based discussion of social issues, and focused on the consequences of each rhetorical form for the collective reasoning in which groups engage.

Gamson (2001), for example, analyzes the use of narratives to personalize public debate about abortion in the American context. He argues that personalization-through-narrative led to positive results, facilitating participation by those who might otherwise have been marginalized, and aiding in exploratory reasoning; storytelling empowered women, mediated "private" and "public" concerns, bridged expert discourse and everyday knowledge, and led to a more complex understanding of the morality of abortion (Black 2009; Ryfe 2006). Perrin (2006) also finds that storytelling facilitates inclusion in deliberative groups and that it serves important expressive and moral functions. In addition, Perrin (2006) shows that group participants can use stories to illustrate the personal consequences of various courses of action in an attempt to persuade others to support a preferred course.

Polletta and Lee's (2006) study of twelve online forums, organized to obtain citizen input on the design and development of a 9/11 memorial, contains an explicit comparison between storytelling (personal, concrete narratives) and reason-giving (voicing abstract principles). Polletta and Lee found that stories were quite important in facilitating the early stages of discussion; as they began deliberation, the online groups used stories to grapple with complexity and ambiguity, to form more coherent views, and to make connections between abstract principles and the particular case at hand (see also Ryfe 2006; Williams 2000). We call this "exploratory" reasoning. In this stage of group deliberations, Polletta and Lee found that stories were used more by those who might otherwise have been marginalized, allowing their views to be heard. In this sense, storytelling helped to bridge differences in social location and opinion, facilitating practical compromises and making the early phases of group discussion broadly inclusive.

Gamson (2001, 1992), Perrin (2006), and Polletta and Lee (2006) find that storytelling is good for democracy because stories serve important expressive and inclusive functions in groups,

drawing in those who might otherwise remain at the margins, and helping individuals to engage in exploratory reasoning. Stories are especially good in helping participants to form more coherent and complex views of complicated issues. However, when it comes to justifying one's views or persuading others to favor a particular outcome or decision—what we call justificatory reasoning—this research finds that there are limits to what stories can achieve. These limits apply particularly to personal stories, the most common kind of story in deliberative group settings and the one most pertinent to normative debates stemming from the deliberative democracy literature.

The limits of stories have to do with anchoring justificatory reasoning in personal experiences that may not be shared by all group members. For example, Perrin (2006) cautions that storytelling can shut down deliberation in cases where others find it difficult to interrogate or rebut claims made based on personal experience. That is, while Perrin (2006) finds that group participants offer stories to support their claims, these stories are not always effective; sometimes personal stories leave other group members stymied, and the conversation simply falters or shifts to proceed in another direction. Polletta and Lee (2006) also find that the telling of personal stories is not always perceived as legitimate by other group members. When they studied online groups working to develop plans for a 9/11 memorial, they found that storytelling was perceived as legitimate only in the initial, exploratory stages of general discussion, as the group worked through possible options. However, when it came to finalizing policy recommendations and forging group consensus around specific decisions, participants stopped using stories, and instead switched to reason-giving—the articulation of abstract principles—to support their claims.

This research takes for granted a particular kind of late-modern democratic setting, where access to public debate is relatively widespread, the state is not heavy-handed, and the problems of public deliberation have to do with spanning social and political divisions rooted in different experiences or "lifeworlds" (Habermas 1984). In such settings, debates about the good or ill effects of story-telling and abstract reasoning tend to focus on their capacity to foster productive dialogue among free citizens, not on their employment by state or other powerful actors in ways

that promote coercion. These studies suggest that storytelling is legitimate in these late-modern democratic settings when groups are exploring options, but are not legitimate when it comes to developing a consensual plan of action or justifying particular policy preferences; these aims are better accomplished through reason-giving in the form of articulating abstract principles.

Below, we describe the results of our analyses of how our focus group members used stories in conversations about three different social controversies: state funding of faith-based prison ministries, regulation of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis of human embryos, and court action to force medical treatment of a dependent child whose parents had refused treatment on religious grounds. Some of our findings confirm prior research and extend our understanding of how storytelling helps people to evoke moral concerns, demonstrate valued identities, and engage in exploratory reasoning. In contrast to prior studies, we found no evidence that storytelling was more frequent among members of marginalized social groups, or that storytelling was perceived as an illegitimate form of justificatory reasoning. We also found that, at times, storytelling and the articulation of abstract principles were woven together by sets of participants as they worked through policy preferences and sought to arrive at a collective policy preference. We found that storytelling was used in dialogue with abstract reason-giving in a mutually constitutive relationship; this advances our understanding of the possibilities of storytelling in democratic deliberation in ways that go beyond limits of prior research (Wilson and Stapleton 2010).

Comparative Focus Groups

Our research project grew out of an interest in understanding how ordinary Americans form and articulate their views on controversial social issues. We used focus groups as our primary data collection strategy. Focus groups are a preferred methodological approach for gaining access to the meanings or interpretive frameworks that underlie assessments of particular phenomena, the taken-for-granted normative assumptions that people draw upon to reach judgments, and the

interactional processes through which meanings are collectively constructed (Bloor et al. 2001, 4-8; Wilkinson 1998). Like individual interviews, focus groups provide a semi-structured setting in which people can explain and develop their views, but they have the advantage of allowing investigators to observe how people make claims and explain positions in interaction with other ordinary people (as opposed to researchers) and to gauge the impact of these interactions on the collective construction of meanings and on people's willingness to modify their views in response to group discussion.

Research Design

We conducted 36 focus groups total, asking participants to discuss one of three vignettes about a controversial social issue. Discussions held in these focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We also conducted individual interviews before and after the focus groups with two participants from each group, which were also recorded and transcribed. Below we provide more detail on our methods and analytic approach.

Field Sites

We conducted data collection in three field sites around the U.S. to capture possible regional variations in talk about controversial issues. We held 12 focus groups each in the Boston, Houston and Twin Cities (Minneapolis-St. Paul) metro areas in the summer and fall of 2011. The focus groups had an average of 8 participants and typically took 60-90 minutes. The focus groups were facilitated by the study's principal investigators (Edgell and Hull) and two graduate research assistants.

Vignettes

Focus group participants discussed a vignette based on one of three social controversies in which the domains of law, science and religion might offer competing lenses for interpretation and

conflicting prescriptions for action. We intentionally avoided highly prominent issues for which participants would likely already have strongly held opinions, and participants were not instructed to try to reach a consensus on the issue at hand. By choosing relatively unfamiliar issues and not instructing groups to reach consensus, we created a "low-stakes" discussion setting in which people would not feel the need to dig in on defending an existing position or to compromise with other group members. In this way, the groups more closely approximated the kinds of everyday discussions people might have with friends and acquaintances when confronted with a vexing social controversy, rather than the kind of purposeful deliberation that occurs in more formal settings such as decision-making bodies (and that is more often represented in existing research on public deliberation).

The vignettes consisted of half-page descriptions of a set of background facts and a call to participants to take a role in the scenario and reach a conclusion about the issue (see Appendix for vignette texts). Facilitators used discussion questions and more detailed background information to guide the focus group conversations. Groups began by silently reading the vignette text, and then the facilitator asked participants for their initial impressions of the issue. Facilitators made an effort to get through all the pre-scripted discussion questions, but occasionally questions had to be omitted for lack of time. Supplementary background information about the case, supplied to each facilitator, was introduced into the focus group conversations if group members asked a relevant question addressed by the background information, or if the facilitator judged that additional information would improve the focus group discussion.

In the **prison ministry** vignette, participants were asked to advise their state's department of corrections on whether to enter into a contract for faith-based prison ministry services. From a religious perspective, such programs might be viewed as opportunities to transform lives; from a legal perspective, they raise issues concerning the separation of church and state; and from a scientific perspective, they raise questions about the ability of social science to establish the causal effects of such programs, i.e. whether they "work." The **medical refusal** vignette presented a

fictionalized version of an actual case in which parents were taken to court for refusing, on religious grounds, to have their 13-year-old son receive chemotherapy and radiation treatments for a highly curable form of cancer. The family was Lutheran but had become active in an online Native American religious group that favored natural treatments. Participants were asked whether, as the judge in this case, they would force the son into the recommended treatment or allow the parents to pursue alternative forms of treatment. The vignette raised issues concerning parental rights, religious freedom, and the potential and limits of Western medical science. The **pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD)** vignette asked participants to imagine themselves on a citizen advisory board tasked with making recommendations on whether and how to regulate the genetic screening of human embryos in the U.S. Should such screening be allowed for serious medical conditions and/or for "social" characteristics such as intelligence or appearance, or should it be banned completely? This vignette raised religious issues related to the creation and destruction of life forms, legal issues about personhood and rights to genetic material and information, and scientific issues concerning the accuracy and consequences of genetic screening.

Participants

We recruited the study participants through a combination of methods. Because we had an interest in the influence of religious identification and social class on people's understandings of social controversies, we conducted groups with religious conservatives, religious liberals, and secularists in each field site; we also included groups that had mixed religious identification. Within these religious identification categories, we conducted groups that were primarily middle class or mixed (working and middle) class. For the religious conservative and religious liberal groups, we began by contacting churches that met the profile of the target group and seeking the assistance of clergy or staff. We supplemented the church-based recruiting with other outreach, including working with community and online groups and advertising. Our final sample included 36 focus groups with 281 participants across the three field sites, with 68 people completing an individual "pre-

interview" before the focus group and 61 of these pre-interviewees also completing a telephone "post-interview" 4-6 weeks later, to assess how their views were affected by group participation. We do not claim that our sample is representative of the American adult population. However, we achieved diversity along many key dimensions, as we discuss below.

Analytic Approach

Our interest in the role of stories in the focus group discussions emerged inductively from our analysis of the sources of knowledge and expertise people invoked when discussing social controversies. We noticed that speakers frequently referenced their own direct personal experience, or the experiences of people they knew, to explain or justify their views. Often these forms of personal knowledge were related in story form. We also noted that speakers regularly told other kinds of stories, including stories drawn from historical or current events or from popular culture such as novels and movies. In fact, we were surprised that speakers appeared to use stories of various kinds much more often than appeals to abstract principles or expert bases of knowledge to articulate their positions. This observation prompted us to undertake a more systematic examination of the role of stories in deliberation about controversial social issues, keeping in mind that our vignettes themselves had story-like qualities which may have fostered a tendency to deploy stories in the group discussion.

We conducted a round of coding focused specifically on the appearance of stories in the transcripts. Following Polletta and Lee (2006), we operationalized storytelling as any instance in which a speaker described something that had happened or might happen, specifying one or more actors emplotted within an action or event sequence, with the intention to convey meaning or make a point (Elliott 2005; Hinchman and Hinchman 1997; Labov and Waletsky 1967). This contrasts with articulating an abstract principle to orient action, as when participants in prison-ministry focus groups argued against state funding because it violates the separation of church and state. We

adopted Polletta and Lee's (2006) definition because it is inclusive; even when they are brief, stories are referencing concrete examples that are meant to communicate meaning and orient action.

First, we coded all transcript passages in which we observed speakers telling stories of any length (coded as "storytelling"); this coding was done in stages, with the authors dividing the work of coding the transcripts and bringing any ambiguous cases to group meetings for adjudication. We then reviewed all storytelling quotations to identify the types of stories present in these passages. The large majority of stories fell into one of four general categories. Stories about **historical and current events** referenced real events, past or present, that could be easily summarized and that were often assumed by the storyteller to be familiar to their interlocutors. Stories describing **hypothetical situations** allowed people to extrapolate from the realm of fact and the details of the vignette to consider parallel examples or puzzle through aspects of the issue at hand. Some stories made reference to the speaker's own direct **personal experience**, or the personal experiences of someone the speaker knew. Finally, some stories drew upon shared knowledge of **popular culture**, including references to films, novels, television shows, and commonly-known religious tales. We assigned story type codes to all of the storytelling quotations. There were a small number of stories that did not fit into any of these broad categories (15 total, or 3% of all coded stories). They are omitted from the analyses presented in this paper.

Table 1 (below) summarizes the distribution of stories by type and vignette. Although much past research on the role of stories in public deliberation has specifically focused on stories drawn from personal experience, we found that other types of stories also figured prominently in the focus groups discussions. Hypotheticals and personal experience stories were the most common types (at 38% of coded stories each), followed by historical or current events (15%), with popular culture stories the least common (9%). The distribution of story types looks fairly similar across the three vignettes, with the exception of the popular culture stories, which were used more often in PGD discussions.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

To look at the characteristics of storytellers, we applied a "storyteller" code, identifying the primary speaker offering each story. We had already developed detailed demographic codes for all of the study participants. Because some participants told more than one story, the same individual could be coded multiple times as a "storyteller."

The final analytic step was to draft detailed analytic memos for each of the vignettes, describing the distribution of story types, the characteristics of storytellers, group reactions to stories, and the ways stories functioned in discussions of that vignette. We then compared the analytic memos for each vignette topic to identify points of overlap across the discussions as well as any differences in emphasis (e.g. the relative prominence of certain story types) by vignette topic. In the next section, we report the results of these analyses.

Talking About Social Controversies

We begin with a brief examination of the identities of the storytellers, and then turn to description and analysis of the role of stories in the group discussions, with attention to how stories combine with abstract principles, foster collaborative reasoning, and sometimes go beyond exploratory discussion to constitute a legitimate form of reason-giving.

Who Tells Stories

The storytellers mostly reflect the characteristics of the overall study sample. In Table 2, we report counts and percentages for *storyteller speaking turns*; individuals who told multiple stories are represented in the table for each story told. The distributions for storytellers and the overall sample are remarkably similar on most demographic characteristics. Although some past research has found that women are more likely than men to tell stories in group discussion settings (e.g. Polletta and Lee 2006), we find that the proportion of stories told by women and men closely parallels the

gender breakdown of the overall sample. Across all vignettes, 50% of stories were told by women and 49% by men; the overall study sample is 52% female and 46% male (with 2% transgender). The distribution of storyteller characteristics is also very close to the sample distribution on other key characteristics such as race/ethnicity, education, income, age, and place of residence. However, regarding political orientation, storytellers are less likely to be Republican and more likely to identify as independent.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

There are a few noteworthy differences among the vignettes in terms of the storytellers' characteristics. The storytellers in the PGD focus groups were younger than those in other groups. Medical Refusal storytellers were disproportionately middle class and PGD storytellers were disproportionately working class. Republicans told more stories in the Medical Refusal groups compared to the other groups, and Democrats were disproportionately likely to tell stories in the Prison Ministry discussions. In all of these cases, though, the differences in storyteller distributions across the vignettes are fairly small. In our discussion of findings, below, we include demographic descriptions of the story-tellers in order to illustrate the distribution of story-types and uses across gender, age, race, and other demographic characteristics.

The Work Stories Do

In our focus groups, storytelling was constitutive of two different kinds of collective reasoning. Participants told stories as they engaged in exploratory reasoning about the nature of the issues at hand and to work through the moral, political and practical implications of the situations posed in each vignette. They also told stories as they engaged in justificatory reasoning, as they gave reasons for their preferences, justified their positions or conclusions, and attempted to persuade others. We did not find a neat break between these two—the conversation moved between

exploration and justification and back again—but it is an analytical distinction that is useful in exploring the legitimacy of storytelling, a concern raised by previous research. In general, we find that storytelling is sometimes combined with the articulation of abstract principles in a collaborative exchange; we also find that sometimes stories are offered *as* reasons and are understood that way by other group members. Taken together, these two findings suggest that the analytic distinction between storytelling and abstract reason-giving is not always so sharp in practice, and that storytelling is constitutive of both exploratory and justificatory forms of collective reasoning in some group settings.

The Use of Stories in Exploratory Reasoning

Exploring Principles

Focus group participants explored a wide range of principles through storytelling, including the importance of avoiding suffering (in the PGD and the Medical Refusal focus groups), the need to treat people with dignity and to protect the vulnerable (Medical Refusal and Prison Ministry groups), the importance of respecting religious rights and freedoms (Prison Ministry and Medical Refusal groups), the value of scientific freedom (PGD groups), and the importance of maintaining the separation of church and state (Prison Ministry groups).

All three vignette topics evoked storytelling intended to identify relevant principles and, in many cases, to weigh competing principles against each other. For example, in the Prison Ministry discussion groups, participants used stories of potentially parallel cases to reason about whether this particular ministry program violated the separation of church and state. We saw this in the focus group in Boston, where participants discussed whether it mattered if the state paid the prison ministry program for its services. Emeka, a middle-class African-American male in his 20s, offered a hypothetical story to stimulate reflection on whether the differential treatment of prisoners was enough to violate the separation of church and state:

> I don't think that money is the essential thing, I think it's the benefits, just the non-equality of it that just to me is a central thing. For example, I know this is a prison example and so it kind of makes things more complicated, but if you think about any other federal or federally funded group of people… I think people would have a lot more objections. For example, say you bring this kind of thing to the statehouse and they're like, "Oh, we're just going to have this ministry; you guys are welcome to come, you're welcome not to come, but the people that come if they perform well in this ministry and it somehow allows them to perform their job better, then we're going to give them bigger offices, we're going to give them parking spots." Not even necessarily, you don't have to give them more, a greater salary, you just give them a better work environment simply because they're participating in this ministry. I think a lot more people would raise objections. So I don't think it's necessarily about the money; I think it's just not fair, if you're Muslim or some other denomination, it doesn't seem to me like you'd even want to be a part of this and so the fact that these people are seemingly fast tracked to rehabilitation because of this program doesn't seem fair.

Emeka uses the hypothetical story about the statehouse employees to reason about the parameters of the principle of church-state separation: Even if the employees are not paid more based on religious participation, giving them better treatment in the workplace would seem to violate the principle. In his view, this hypothetical story makes the contours of the principle easier to grasp, perhaps because many more people have been in a workplace than a prison.

The PGD vignette evoked many stories that helped focus groups explore abstract principles. In some cases, deeply moving personal stories facilitated discussion of relevant principles. Kathy, a middle-class white woman in her 60s, shared her story with her Boston focus group:

> I inherited a very rare but serious endocrine disorder on my paternal side that has claimed many people on my birth father's side . . . I seem to have inherited the benign form, but there is always the possibility and I live with the possibility that it could turn malignant at any moment. . . I'm going to be 63 in December, I mean I'm very grateful, quite frankly, I'm grateful I didn't have children because I would carry such a burden of guilt about their suffering because this has been a horrific journey and I've had it relatively easy compared to what other people go through with this disease. But the problem of that embryo, I don't know. Would I not want to be here, would I want to be here? I do want to say I'm grateful I didn't have children. Because I very well could have, I don't know if I would have passed on the gene, that could be anyone's guess. But . . . if I could have had this test, if that would have been available to me, if the opportunity to become pregnant would have become available, I don't know what I would have done with that information. I probably would have said I don't want them to go, if the embryo would have come back [positive for the disorder], I probably would have said no, I don't want them to suffer.

In response, Skip, a white working-class transgender man in his 20s, immediately shared his own account of health problems that might mean that, had the technology been around when he was conceived, he might not exist, concluding that, "We learn to navigate with what we've got. Yeah, there will be different obstacles for all of us and you learn to deal with that." However, he also upholds another principle, and that's "a question of access." Unequal resources, he fears, will determine who will "have access to the screening . . . have the privilege of being able to use this." Shanice, a working-class African-American woman in her 20s, then says that what she sees at stake is the principle of choice: "It's like, okay America, let's call this bluff. We have the information, are you going to let me choose? Let me be in the driver's seat?" After another couple of minutes of group discussion, Kathy, the original storyteller, brings up the issue of resources again, saying "it is really about affluence. Poor people aren't going to have access to this." Others in the group agree.

This discussion illustrates how focus group members use stories to explore and reflect on abstract principles. Both Kathy and Skip invoke stories based on personal experience to explore aspects of the issue, and these stories flow seamlessly into consideration of abstract principles concerning access and inequality. Kathy's initial story about her health history leads her to wonder how the availability of PGD screening would have influenced her thinking about whether to have children, which then stimulates Skip to tell his own story which in turn prompts other group members to wonder who will have the option of using this technology in the future, referencing the abstract principle of equal access to social goods.

Collaborative Efforts

In our focus groups reasoning about principles via storytelling was often a cooperative or collective effort, with a set of focus group participants engaging in a back-and-forth exchange that allowed them to flesh out which principles applied in a particular case and what the appropriate course of

action might be. A Boston group discussing the Medical Refusal vignette included an exchange between Roy and Roger that provides an example of using stories to identify relevant moral principles. Roy, a middle-class white man in his 50s, told a story about a boy he heard about in the news, whose parents refused surgery for his blocked intestine; the boy died. Roger, a working-class white man in his 50s, responded to Roy's story by pointing out the differences between the story in the news (a blocked intestine) and the case in the vignette, saying "Well, remember that chemotherapy and radiation is horrific torture." Roy agreed that chemotherapy and radiation are awful, and Roger restated his point ("It's not easy, it's terrible") and Roy agreed with him yet again. But then Roger said, "But, to sit and let cancer eat your boy away . . .," and Roy responded, "The lesser of two evils, I guess." In this case, Roy offered a story to illustrate the principle that children are vulnerable and therefore need protection: The state sometimes must intervene to protect innocent children from their parents' bad choices, especially if children's lives are at stake. Roger, though, was not convinced that Roy's story was a good fit for the case presented in the vignette; Roy's story involved a relatively straightforward surgery, but the case described in the vignette involves invasive and "horrific" chemotherapy. Roger's response to Roy's story was to invoke another abstract principle: Suffering is bad, and making a child suffer is abusive. Roy agreed this was a valid concern. Roger then acknowledged that Roy's story was articulating an appropriate principle for consideration in this case. Roy's story evoked a dialogue with Roger where the follow-up engaged both speakers in reasoning about the relevant moral principles at stake.

Sometimes, when an individual used a story to reason through why s/he might choose one particular principle as a guideline, other focus group members responded in a dialogue that worked to build a broader discussion of alternative principles at hand. Carmen, a middle-class white woman in her 50s, told a series of stories in her Twin Cities Medical Refusal focus group as she worked through which principle applied to the question of whether the court should force the 13-year-old Jimmy to have chemotherapy treatment. First, the question of whether the parents should

"obey the law of the land" was illustrated by a story about the German people blindly following Hitler in World War II. She reasoned that although "Jesus says obey the law of the land," it is also true that "[t]he German people had a choice. You know? And they made the wrong decision; people died." Carmen used this historical narrative to suggest the principle of the duty to follow one's conscience: We all have to make our own decisions based on our consciences, so we cannot simply follow the law blindly.

The World War II story supported the idea that parents in general should follow their consciences based on their religious beliefs, even if it meant defying the courts; but Carmen went on to question whether that was the right thing to do *in this particular case*. To further explore that question (whether her first story had indexed the most relevant abstract principle), she told a hypothetical story in which she inserted herself into the vignette in the parent role:

> And that's where the choice and what have you come into mind. I listened to what you said about the Satanist and that's a very good point. I….but since I'm not a Satanist, I am a conservative, non-liberal Christian, I would like to…me personally, if I had a kid, I would pray with my husband and go by…I mean it's one thing to go along with your belief system, but I might be wrong, you can throw stones at me later, but my child, I want him to live. I would go with what is the best, period. If it's with the chemo, fine; if the alternative is working, fine. That's all I'm trying to say, I would go for the best for my child.

Here, Carmen is referencing an earlier hypothetical scenario posed by Garth, a middle-class white man in his 30s with some college education, who used the example of Satanists and posed this question, "(B)ut what if your belief system doesn't match up with the rest of society?" While the story about Nazi Germany illustrated that citizens should resist the state when it comes to matters of conscience, the hypothetical story about what she would do it if were her own child led Carmen to conclude that in this case the parents were wrong, and the state was right: The principle of saving a child's life outweighs the principle of following your conscience, so the court should force Jimmy into treatment. Two other group members, Evan and Therese, point out that Carmen is still, in the final analysis, saying that it was the parents' decision and Carmen agrees with that, but says that if the parents are morally wrong, the court has to step in. For Therese, Carmen's story was useful

for thinking about the nature of responsibility in such cases. In remarks immediately following Carmen's stories, Therese concurs that the parents in the vignette were wrong because they were not doing everything in their power to save their child.

These stories helped participants reason together about which principle or principles applied in the particular case posed in the vignette. This was true for interactive exchanges like the one between Roy and Roger, but also when individuals like Carmen gave voice to their own process of reasoning so that the group as a whole could consider, and perhaps build upon, their stories and conclusions.

Consequences and Cautionary Tales

Telling stories helped people envision both moral and practical consequences of particular courses of action. Sometimes the focus was simply pragmatic: Will some course of action *work*? In the PGD groups, people told stories to illustrate that banning PGD might be desirable, but it is not really possible at this point, as the technology is already in place. In the Prison Ministry groups, stories about consequences were sometimes used to cast doubt on claims that any real rehabilitation would take place in such a program. As Abel, a middle-class African-American male in his 20s, remarked in a Houston focus group:

> Well, I mean I worked in a jail and these men. . . they're all criminals, they're in jail. But as soon as they get to jail all of a sudden they want to talk to you about Jesus. I'm like, wait a minute, you weren't talking about Jesus when you were committing crimes . . . You know, a lot of guys find religion in prison because there is not a lot, a lot else going on. . . . I mean, just seeing a lot of these guys that are, do heinous crimes and they get out, within weeks and months they're back in for the same exact thing. Yet when they were in prison they were the one running the prison ministry.

Sometimes the envisioning of consequences went beyond pragmatic concerns and addressed moral and personal consequences, as illustrated in the exchange between Roy and Roger above. It was common in the Medical Refusal discussion groups for people to tell stories of how horrific chemotherapy can be to illustrate the consequences of forcing Jimmy into conventional treatment

and to raise the moral question of whether the invasive and damaging nature of chemotherapy justified the turn to alternative medical therapies.

Storytelling can also be a way of prompting consideration of remote, long-term, or systemic consequences. In the PGD groups, popular science fiction stories from books and movies including *Gattaca, Flowers for Algernon,* and *Brave New World* and historical stories of Hitler-inspired Nazi eugenics were retold as "cautionary tales" envisioning longer term consequences of present-day policy choices; for example, invoking the specter of a world inhabited by genetically engineered super-humans. These cautionary tales emphasized the dark side of science and, as a form of reasoning by analogy, established the PGD vignette as a case in which citizen oversight of science was justified—an analytical task similar to the one undertaken by the scholar designating what a case is a "case of" (see Ragin and Becker 1992, especially chapters by Abbott, Abbott, and White; see also Tavory and Timmermans 2009).

In the Medical Refusal groups, cautionary tales drawn either from current events or from personal experience were told to place the vignette within a specific contemporary legal and political context, one in which children can—and do—die of preventable causes because parents invoke free exercise rights. Some of these took the form of cautionary tales about religious cults and fanatics—the Branch Davidians, Jim Jones, and the like. One of the most affecting cautionary tales about religious extremism came from Bernice, who, along with other members of her suburban Pentecostal church community, participated in one of the Twin Cities focus groups discussing the Medical Refusal vignette. Bernice, a white working-class woman in her 70s, told the following story about the death of her granddaughter, in response to others in her group who felt that the family in the vignette should be given the choice to decline treatment for their son:

> My daughter and son-in-law had a similar experience [to the one in the vignette]. They belong to a group that considered it evil to go to the doctor. And my 8-year-old granddaughter came down with…cancer in her kidney. And they went with their group until it was really too late. . . They finally did take her to the doctor but by the time they finally decided to go against the group and take her to the doctor, it was actually too late. So I'm a little opinionated about, [laughing nervously]

> about…seeing that the child gets the treatment that's best for him, rather than my [religious] beliefs.

In telling her story, Bernice invited other group members to reflect on the cost of strict adherence to an abstract principle (religious freedom) by sharing an emotionally-fraught experience in which her own granddaughter died due to the refusal of conventional medical care on religious grounds. This story introduced personal and moral elements into the focus group discussion, and implied a narrative arc that expressed Bernice's own moral identity; she has become the type of person who feels strongly about making sure children get proper medical care over and above anyone's—even her own—religious beliefs. Bernice's story did the kind of expressive interactional work that others have identified as being particularly suited to storytelling. But she also reminded other focus group members that there are more than abstract principles at stake in cases like these; there are real children who can suffer the most extreme of consequences. This was important particularly for this group, comprised of members of a Pentecostal congregation who initially tended to focus solely on the parental and religious rights aspects of the case.

The Interplay of Stories and Reasons

At the time Bernice told the story, the facilitator commented on how "close to home" this situation was for Bernice, who murmured agreement. There was a short pause, and then the group moved into an extended episode of collective reasoning that combined elements of exploration and justification with the purpose of sorting out when parental rights should be upheld and when the state should step in. This longer exchange began when Eve, a white working-class woman, said, "I think first I would make sure [the child] did understand the ramifications of not doing the medical thing and then I'd decide from there if he understood the graveness." Annie, a white working-class woman in her 50s, responded that "[i]n our culture the parents are responsible for

their children" and that as long as it's not "criminal, or locking them in the closet or something" that "I think the parents should have the right to make the decision." She said she disagreed that that parents had been neglectful because in the vignette, the parents were not simply refusing medical treatment, but rather had consulted with both standard medical practitioners and alternative medical practitioners (whom, Annie noted, the court did not consult). Because they were "working on it, trying to resolve it in a way they believed was the best," they were not neglecting him.

Leeann then joined the discussion, saying, "You can die from diseases. People can die from things like that, especially without treatment, but sometimes the treatment itself kills people." She argued that when that happens, it is the doctors who are at fault but we do not prosecute them because they are trying to "do the best they can with what they know." She then told a story about how the midwife who had assisted with the home birth of her own son was once involved in a home birth where the child died. The midwife had to go to court for a hearing, but when "doctors intervened in the hospital and the baby died because of the intervention" the doctors were not prosecuted. Jennifer, a white middle-class woman in her 30s, then responded by articulating some hypothetical situations in order to illustrate a more general concern about "how far should the state be able to step in" when it comes to protecting children. "What if," she asked, "children have diabetes and the parents let them eat sugar?" "You're constantly surrounded by state versus parent, and I think that's really . . .the crux of it," Jennifer said. The conversation then moved on to a consideration of whether it mattered that the parents were acting on their religious beliefs, in particular, versus on non-religious values and commitments.

Bernice's story was personal, and painful. And focus group members did not engage Bernice directly after she told her story by challenging her to articulate her principles in a more abstract way. Rather, Bernice's story was accepted as a legitimate grounding for her claim about what ought to be done in this case: the child should be forced into treatment. The subsequent conversation suggests that while Annie and Leann were not persuaded by Bernice's claim, it was

not because she had inappropriately invoked a personal story. Rather, participants recognized the principles behind her claim and articulated their own—in one case, also through offering a story (about the midwife). Jennifer then articulated the more general issue which was, as she said, the crux of the matter: Where and how do you draw the line between state control and parental control when it comes to child well-being? Jennifer was one of the participants we had chosen for a post-interview for this focus group, and when we asked her if there was anything about the focus group that she remembered particularly well or had thought about after the group, she brought up Bernice's story:

> I am very interested in how someone who is that close to the situation deals with it, so I do remember being like, oh well what do *you* think? Immediately her opinion on this whole discussion – really I was most interested in what she had to say more than anyone else. That she was so close to it.

The story that Bernice told about her granddaughter clearly helped Bernice herself to reason through her views. Likewise, the story that Leeann told about her midwife's experience was a way of reasoning through which principles should apply in the scenario described in our vignette. But while Leeann combined her story with the giving of more general reasons to support her claim (we don't prosecute doctors when they try their best and the patient dies, why should we prosecute the parents, who are clearly trying their best?), Bernice did not. Her story was itself the reason that supported her claim and it was treated as such by other group members.

The Use of Stories in Justificatory Reasoning

In our focus groups, we found many people who told a story that was, itself, the reason for advising a particular course of action, and this was perceived as legitimate by focus group members. When stories serve as the basis for supporting one's claim, it is often in the context of persuading others by establishing one's own experience and insight with the same issue the vignette illustrates (for one example, see Abel's story about prison ministry, above). At other times, stories were told as part of a back-and-forth exchange to try to persuade others that the speaker has identified the

correct principle, and is applying it correctly, while another focus group member is focusing on the wrong principle or not thinking through the context or consequences. Each focus group had numerous examples of the use of stories to argue persuasively.

In one Boston group, Christine and Ana used personal and hypothetical stories to question a third woman, Alice, when she took the position that Jimmy ought to be able to decide on his (alternative) treatment course for himself. Alice, a middle-class white woman in her 20s, began with a historical story:

> It feels like it's a war against his beliefs. If you think – dragged by handcuffs to a hospital is something he doesn't want to do and his parents don't want him to do and his community doesn't want him to do, it kind of reminds me of when the Native Americans were shut into their reservations and now everything sucks for them now down there, you know? I don't like forcing people to do things they don't want to do because the government thinks it's best for them. Screw that! . . .. I want [crosstalk] his individual freedom to be validated and justified.

Christine, a middle-class white woman in her 20s, then told a hypothetical story about good parents making their children brush their teeth because it is in the children's best interest. Alice countered with a story from her personal experience, about an experimental school where children do not have to learn math if they choose not to; they can play the violin or concentrate on something they want to learn. Alice concluded that "sometimes it doesn't work for people and sometimes it does," but said that she favors that kind of freedom. Christine then told a personal story of people she knows in the "un-school" movement, who home-school their children and give them that same kind of freedom to choose what to study; Christine had not quite finished when Ana, a working-class white woman in her 40s, jumped in and said that it's not good for the children, and Christine agreed with her. Alice was not persuaded, and concluded her part of the exchange by saying that "it's not our obligation to force people to do something because we think it's best for them." Ana and Christine came to the opposite conclusion, and Ana got in the last word before the group moved on, referencing Christine's hypothetical story from earlier in the exchange: "Nobody in the world is going to be able to convince me that it is best for a kid not to brush their teeth." In this exchange among these three women, a range of stories—about Native American history, tooth-

brushing, and alternative forms of schooling—are offered as justifications for speakers' positions on whether the child in the vignette should be allowed to decide on his own treatment.

Others told stories about their own experiences with religiously-based rehabilitative groups (Al-Anon or substance abuse programs), arguing that critics ought not to dismiss prisoners' participation or assume it is insincere. These stories were told to show that lives can be changed by participation in a religiously-based support group environment. Other stories involved people's own experiences in volunteering for a prison-ministry-type group. Jermaine, a middle-class African-American man in his 50s, told his Houston focus group a story of his experience with a church-based prison pen-pal program to explain his support for the prison ministry rehabilitation program described in the vignette:

> As a matter of fact, here at Fairview we had a ministry that was a pen-pal ministry and I chose to participate in that, and I found it to be personally rewarding and just corresponding with an individual, giving them avenues to express their feelings and to find camaraderie. I thought it was comforting for myself as well as the person, and when that individual was released, he actually came to the church and expressed how grateful he was for being able to communicate and having a pen-pal. So I think any programs such as this would be beneficial.

Jermaine narrated his personal experience as evidence of the benefits of faith-based prison programs and as a justification for taking a stance in favor of such programs. He was followed by Martin, a middle-class white man in his 30s, who told his own story, agreeing with Jermaine's point and bolstering the case for supporting Prison Ministry programs:

> Our pastor actually became a Christian when he was in prison and the person that ended up becoming his father in the ministry, and they're still friends today, and I guess it's almost 30 years ago or so that they became pen-pals when he was in prison, incarcerated.

Stories of personal experience were told not in addition to reason-giving, but were themselves given as the reason one takes a particular stance on an issue, and to prompt others to reason about points of view they might previously have dismissed.

In some Prison Ministry focus groups, personal stories were shared as reasons for opposing the proposed program, and prompted other group members to share similar stories, in effect turning

individual personal experiences into the raw material for collective narrative reasoning. In one Houston focus group, Karina, a middle-class African-American woman in her 30s, shared a story about her mother's rejection from various Christian churches because of her Rastafarian practices:

> My mom actually, she prays this Rastafari, Rastafarianism. Don't ask me what it all means, what it all encompasses, I don't [know], but the one thing I do remember, she would try to go into churches, Christian churches in particular, the, I wouldn't say backlash, but they weren't that accepting of her. The trying to change and mold her into being a Christian and not accepting her in the way she wore her hair, and trying to change—she had dreadlocks—and trying to change us, and it was just that trying change her and not accepting her for who she was and how she came there. And that has shaped how I choose my church. I don't like that whole – it's almost cult-like. I don't, I don't like that. I don't like, "You have to do it this way." So it, [sigh] I would appreciate it if [the prison ministry] was more inclusive or just non-denominational. You know, pray to and . . . worship whoever you want to. But don't exclude everybody. I don't like that part of it at all. ,

Karina's story prompted fellow group member Becca, a working-class African-American woman in her 20s, to immediately share details of her own religious upbringing. She described her "severely Christian" family exploring different sects, many of which had little tolerance for versions of Christianity other than their own. This observation prompted Karina to remark that this competition and exclusion among Christian sects confused her, and Becca followed up with an affirmation that "[i]t's very confusing actually, and you assume that Christianity is Christianity, but no way." Becca then went on to tell a hypothetical story about a prisoner going through the proposed prison ministry program, being released from prison, moving to a different area and discovering that he was not welcome in some Christian churches that held different views. She then delivered the punchline to this hypothetical narrative: "So it's just, it's very confusing, especially with Christianity, and I know from pretty direct experience. So I'm just not really sure how the whole religious aspect is as unifying, as it, you know, is supposed to read, at least on paper."

Karina and Becca's dialogue illustrates the use of stories as a form of justificatory reasoning within the focus groups. Both women draw on their personal histories to tell stories of religious intolerance, and this first-hand experience of intolerance is offered as a reason to be

skeptical of a prison program that requires adherence to a particular version of Christianity. Karina uses the story about her mother to justify her opposition to the proposed program and her preference for a more inclusive approach. The story effectively indexes more abstract reasons (intolerance and exclusion are bad) without needing to state them as such. Becca's response to Karina's initial story suggests this approach resonated with her, and far from dismissing Karina's story as an overly-personal example, she uses it to engage in more narrative reasoning, this time with a hypothetical story about a prisoner who is ultimately harmed by having participated in an overly-restrictive form of Christianity through the prison program.

Martin's response to Jermaine's pen-pal story, Ana's response to Christine's teeth-brushing and home-schooling stories, and Becca's response to Karina's story about her mother all illustrate how fellow group members often validate the use of stories as a form of reason-giving in the group discussions. Even group members who are not persuaded by particular stories (as Alice was not by Christine's stories) do not reject stories as illegitimate forms of reason-giving. In some cases, they simply offer other stories that represent alternative reasons. In addition to being clear examples of justificatory reasoning through stories, the exchanges described above also illustrate how individual stories can link together as collective reasoning in the context of group discussion of a complex issue. Sometimes this collaboration takes the form of offering additional stories to support an initial narrative, whereas in other cases stories assert competing claims about the best course of action. But in both scenarios, the sharing of stories facilitates reasoning together on a challenging and unfamiliar topic.

Discussion

Our research builds upon and extends the sociological literature investigating what stories do—how they are used, and by whom—in various empirical deliberative settings. In our focus groups, people used stories in ways that previous research would lead us to expect: to express agreement

or disagreement indirectly, to display a valued identity, to introduce emotional, moral and personal considerations into the discussion, and to show empathy. Beyond these expressive functions, we found that people told stories as a form of reasoning that allowed them to explore relevant abstract principles, to envision moral and practical consequences of different courses of action, and to assert stories themselves as a form of reason-giving.

Unlike several other studies, we did not find that stories were disproportionately used by members of marginalized social groups. Nor did we find that the telling of stories shut down debate or was perceived as somehow less legitimate than, or antithetical to, the giving of general or abstract reasons. Not only were stories commonly used to support claims and persuade others, but such exchanges often involved an **interplay of stories and more abstract reason-giving**, as group members articulated the principles implied in others' stories or themselves wove reason-giving and storytelling together in their responses to one another and to the questions we posed. Stories were told as part of a back-and-forth collective discussion that melded stories and abstract reason-giving, one rhetorical form building on the other, as participants worked to figure out and articulate their own views and to persuade others in the group. We found that people used a variety of story genres to forge a shared basis for discussion, including personal stories, but also hypothetical stories and stories drawing on history, current events, and popular culture.

In our focus groups, it is difficult to tell how successful people were in using stories to persuade others; this is due to the format of the groups. At the beginning of each group we asked people to read the vignette to themselves; then we went around the group and asked everyone to respond, initially, to the question at hand—should the judge force Jimmy into treatment, should the state contract with a religious prison ministry program, should PGD be regulated? We then had a wide-ranging group discussion. At the end of the discussion, sometimes group leaders asked people to restate their views but other times did not (usually because the group had run long). Even when group leaders did ask people to restate their views at the end of the discussion, some participants said they would have to think about it more to know what their final recommendation

would be. In terms of the interactions within the group, sometimes people engaged with another person's story in ways that the examples above illustrate—telling their own stories to support or counter the initial point, interweaving storytelling and more abstract forms of reasoning, and the like. Often stories did not evoke a direct response, but this was true, as well, when participants made more abstract or declarative statements of their positions; this is not surprising in groups which sometimes followed a pattern of turn-taking rather than engagement for at least a portion of the time. In such cases, persuasiveness is difficult to judge.

Our post-interviews do shed some light on processes of persuasion. Among the people who did a post-interview several weeks after the focus group, 11 percent (7 out of 61) told us that their stance on the issues raised by the vignette had changed as a result of the discussion. Another 26 percent (16 people) said that while they still agreed with their initial position, their views had become more complex in that they had gained a more nuanced understanding of the complicated nature of the issues in the vignette, or more respect for opposing views and those who held them. Sometimes people in the post-interviews referred to stories they had heard in their focus group as one of the things prompting them to change their minds or develop a more complex understanding. This was true of Jennifer's response to Bernice's story (described above); but Jennifer was not the only one for whom stories were remembered weeks after participating in the group. In short, most people did not change their minds as a result of the focus group discussions, but our post-interviews suggest that a substantial minority (over one third) did think differently about the issue in question after the group discussion, and sometimes stories were explicitly cited in explaining the shifts in thinking.

Conclusion

We live in an era of notable political polarization, which has led to Congressional gridlock and increased distrust of politicians and governing institutions. In such a climate, one might anticipate

that focus groups comprised of a diverse array of citizens, asked to respond to vignettes that dramatize contemporary social controversies, might have quickly devolved into shouting matches or ended in frustration and disengagement. In fact, our research was designed to test for this, and we thought we might see stark differences between groups comprised mainly of those sharing broad religious and political orientations (e.g. religious conservatives, religious liberals, secularists) and mixed groups. But in all of our groups, what emerged was respectful and reasoned discourse, a sense of active engagement, and a willingness to talk through in some detail general principles as well as specific implications for policy and social outcomes. Integral to this civil and constructive public deliberation was the telling of stories, which helped individuals to weave together their own experiences, hypothetical examples, cautionary tales, abstract reasons, and the claims of various kinds of experts into constructive and relatively nuanced dialogue.

Our findings suggest that respectful and reasoned discourse is possible among ordinary Americans from a diverse array of backgrounds, even around thorny contemporary dilemmas. In part, this is because storytelling seems to exert an influence toward moderation and complexity, and help groups avoid the snap judgments and reification of opposing ideological stances constitutive of the culture wars. Why does storytelling play this role? Stories personalize and concretize abstract concepts like harm, fairness, and autonomy, fostering more nuanced discussion of which principles might apply in a given case and directing attention to the real harm that could be caused to real people if a given course of action were to be pursued. Stories subvert the over-generalization that can result from discourse rooted solely in abstract reasoning, and undermine ideological, totalizing claims. Storytelling may also prevent privileged group members from avoiding talking about the moral consequences of the particular courses of action they champion. In this way, the telling of stories levels the playing field in diverse groups in which people bring to the table different backgrounds, cultural toolkits, experiences, and expertise. Stories also call upon tellers and hearers to have imagination and empathy as they direct attention to the personal,

moral, and practical consequences of collective choices and social policies, thus undermining and us-and-them, culture-wars orientation.

Our analysis does not suggest that prior accounts of what stories do are wrong. Rather, we argue that while it is useful for analytical purposes to distinguish between the stating of abstract principles and the telling of stories as distinct rhetorical forms, it is also important to recognize when and how they work together to facilitate the process of collective reasoning. Our analysis shows how stories can be constitutive of the process of reasoning together—by fostering collaborative exploration of principles and consequences and by serving as a legitimate form of reason-giving-through-narrative.

It is important to keep in mind that the positive and constructive aspects of storytelling that we found in our groups might not be found in all social contexts. In other settings, stories might be deployed to shut down debate, marginalize or silence the less powerful, and subvert democratic outcomes. Indeed, in contrast to previous research (cf. Gamson 2001; cf. Polletta and Lee 2006) we did not find stories to be "weapons of the weak," disproportionately told by women or people of color, by those with less education, or by those espousing unpopular opinions. But this finding might be due to the way in which our focus groups were structured, to the nature of the charge given to each group, or to the subject matter under discussion. In general, we need more research on power dynamics in public deliberation, including a focus on how the broader social context and the structure of the deliberating group shape the use of stories and abstract reasoning to make and justify claims, include or exclude marginal members, and foster more or less constructive and reasoned public debate.

In addition, our research suggests some other fruitful avenues for future research. While stating abstract principles and storytelling are distinct rhetorical forms, we found them to be interwoven in practice, especially as groups attempted to sort through which abstract principles apply in a particular case. Sometimes this interweaving was a truly collaborative and cooperative process. These collective dynamics of trading stories and combining stories and abstract reasons

have not been emphasized, in part because of a focus in much prior research on individual use of distinctive rhetorical forms in deliberative settings. We found these collective, cooperative, collaborative efforts to be important and to contribute to civil, respectful deliberation, and they merit further investigation.

Our initial research objective was to understand the cultural resources that people draw upon in forming their views of social controversies. Research on social controversies is not always cast in a deliberative democracy framework, but it does concentrate on how people come to understand the complexity of controversial issues, when and how they are guided by expert discourses, and how they interpret public issues and policy priorities in light of their own experiences (Binder 2004; Evans 2002). In this research, as well, an attention to storytelling may be useful in helping to identify the cultural frameworks people bring to bear in assessing the nature of the controversy, in understanding the different sides and the various stakes, and in forming preferences for how to move forward. Such cultural frameworks may take the form of cognitive schemas that are difficult to ask people about directly but that may be revealed through the stories people tell and the metaphors they use (Quinn 2005). The social controversies literature is also concerned with understanding the link between expert views and personal experience (Evans 2010), and future research should explore whether and how people use stories either to resist the abstract and rationalizing discourses of elites or to translate them into terms that resonate with their own experiences. Stories may be central to how people grapple with, resist, or rework expert claims to assert their own understandings (cf. Gamson 2001).

Going forward, it seems promising to think explicitly and at length about how to study collective reasoning as a social process that involves both abstract reason-giving and storytelling. We need research questions and analytical frameworks that are more sensitized to the interplay between the particular and the abstract, the emotional and the cognitive, and collective and individual identities as groups reason together about common social problems.

Appendix: Vignette Texts

Prison Ministry Vignette

Your state's Department of Corrections is considering a contract with a faith-based prison ministry program operated by the Prison Fellowship Ministries. The contract would put in place a voluntary, 18-month residential rehabilitation program for eligible prisoners. The stated goal of the program is to transform prisoners' lives and reduce recidivism (return to criminal activity after release from prison). Program staff would select inmates for participation based on their potential for rehabilitation. The program would be housed in a prison wing that offers greater privacy and better facilities than the rest of the prison. The program would include a package of services required for prison release, more freedom of movement, more contact with family, and support at parole board hearings. The program would be run by staff and volunteers and would be highly structured, requiring participants to attend Bible study classes, Friday night revival meetings, and Sunday church services. Other program elements (e.g. substance abuse, anger management) would be delivered from an explicitly religious perspective.

Some citizens and prisoner groups object to the contract because they believe it violates the separation of church and state, or because it allows the state to deliver extra services to prisoners willing to participate in the program, or because they worry that not all religious beliefs will be accepted or supported by the program. Others argue in favor of the contract, pointing out that the program is completely voluntary, there is an urgent need to rehabilitate prisoners, and studies have shown that similar programs have worked in other states. You have been selected to serve on a citizen advisory panel to provide public input to the Department of Corrections on whether to go forward with the program contract. How do you think the panel should advise the state?

Parental Medical Decision-Making Vignette

Jimmy Sloan, a 13-year-old boy from Webber County, Iowa, was diagnosed with a curable form of cancer and received an initial round of chemotherapy treatment. Unhappy with the side effects of the chemotherapy and interested in exploring other treatment options, Jimmy and his parents decided not to continue the chemotherapy and radiation treatment recommended by their doctors. Instead they switched to an alternative medicine approach that included herbs and vitamins. They also sought second opinions from the Mayo Clinic and the University of Iowa; specialists at both of these institutions backed up the recommendation for chemotherapy and radiation. Jimmy's physicians reported the case to child protection authorities. The Webber County attorney filed a petition accusing Jimmy's parents of child neglect and endangerment, and sought a court injunction to force the Sloans to continue the recommended treatment, which medical doctors stated had an 80-95% probability of curing the cancer. In court papers, Jimmy asserted that the recommended treatment conflicted with his religious beliefs. The Sloans self-identify as Lutherans, but also belong to a Native American religious group that favors natural-medicine approaches to healing.

If you were the judge in this case, what would you do? Would you grant the injunction forcing the parents to continue the chemotherapy treatment for Jimmy? If they refused, would you remove Jimmy from their care?

Embryo Screening Vignette

Preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) refers to the practice of screening human embryos for particular genetic traits prior to implanting the embryo in a woman's uterus. Embryos are first created through in vitro fertilization (meaning that human sperm and egg are combined outside the womb, using laboratory procedures). These embryos are then examined at the genetic level, usually with the goal of identifying embryos carrying undesirable traits (such as markers for serious diseases, or chromosomal abnormalities that reduce the odds of a successful pregnancy), so that prospective parents can decide which embryos they will or will not use to create a pregnancy. If acceptable embryos are identified, the final step is to implant the embryos and attempt to start a pregnancy. Unused embryos are usually destroyed, although they can also be preserved indefinitely or donated for use by other prospective parents.

You have been invited to sit on a citizen advisory board that will make recommendations on whether and how to regulate the practice of embryo screening in the U.S. As a board member, you must form an opinion on the following issues:

- Whether PGD should be regulated at all in the United States;
- What medical conditions PGD can be used to screen for; and,
- What non-medical (or "social") characteristics (such as intelligence or eye color) PGD can be used to screen for.

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Table 1: Story Types, by Vignette and Total Sample

	Medical Refusal	%	Prison Ministry	%	PGD	%	Total Sample	%
Historical or current events	24	17%	26	16%	33	14%	83	15%
Hypotheticals	52	36%	65	39%	88	38%	205	38%
Personal experience	59	41%	70	42%	74	32%	203	38%
Popular culture	8	6%	4	2%	34	15%	46	9%
TOTAL	143		165		229		537	
(% of All Stories)	(27%)		(31%)		(43%)			

Table 2: Characteristics of Storytellers, by Vignette and Total Sample

	Medical Refusal	%	Prison	%	PGD	%	Total Sample	%
Gender								
Female	71	50%	78	47%	108	51%	257	50%
Male	71	50%	88	53%	94	45%	253	49%
Transgender	0	0%	0	0%	9	4%	9	2%
Total	142		166		211		519	
Age								
Teens	1	1%	2	1%	0	0%	3	1%
20s	35	25%	50	30%	74	35%	159	31%
30s	18	13%	20	12%	52	25%	90	17%
40s	30	21%	11	7%	37	18%	78	15%
50s	43	30%	50	30%	27	13%	120	23%
60s	8	6%	33	20%	21	10%	62	12%
70+	7	5%	0	0%	0	0%	7	1%
Total	142		166		211		519	
Social Class								
Middle class	113	84%	122	76%	142	69%	377	75%
Working class	21	16%	39	24%	65	31%	125	25%
Total	134		161		207		502	
Education								
< high school	0	0%	3	2%	6	3%	9	2%
High school	5	4%	9	5%	4	2%	18	3%
Some college	63	46%	45	27%	62	29%	170	33%
College degree	54	39%	51	31%	102	48%	207	40%
Masters or more	16	12%	58	35%	37	18%	111	22%
Total	138		166		211		515	
Income								
$0-24,999	19	15%	39	25%	91	45%	149	31%
$25,000-49,999	33	25%	61	40%	46	23%	140	29%
$50,000-99,999	53	40%	45	29%	56	27%	154	32%
$100,000-249,999	21	16%	6	4%	10	5%	37	8%
$250,000+	5	4%	2	1%	1	0%	8	2%
Total	131		153		204		488	
Political Identity								
Democrat	51	37%	90	54%	66	32%	207	41%
Independent	33	24%	35	21%	55	27%	123	24%
None/other	22	16%	41	25%	66	32%	129	25%
Republican	32	23%	0	0%	20	10%	52	10%
Total	138		166		207		511	
Race/Ethncity								
Asian	4	3%	5	3%	10	5%	19	4%
Black/Afr.-Amer.	29	21%	37	22%	31	15%	97	19%
Hispanic/Latino	6	4%	3	2%	16	8%	25	5%
Mixed	8	6%	12	7%	25	12%	45	9%
Other	0	0%	10	6%	3	1%	13	3%
White	92	66%	98	59%	125	60%	315	61%
Total	139		165		210		514	
Residence								
City	98	71%	126	76%	155	73%	379	74%
Rural	3	2%	3	2%	5	2%	11	2%
Suburbs	37	27%	36	22%	51	24%	124	24%
Total	138		165		211		514	

Note: Counts are of speaking turns, not individuals.

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