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Personal Trials and Social Fears: Examining Reflexivity in Captivity Narratives

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Abstract:

In both the historical and contemporary contexts, women's narratives of abduction and captivity have played varied roles, serving as memoirs and sources of inspiration, shaping images of social problems, and promoting social policies. This essay uses sociological tools to examine the reflexive relationships that facilitate these roles. The social conditions and concerns of an era produce symbolic codes used in personal narratives of captivity, making a unique experience widely understood. The process of abstraction transforms diverse experiences of captivity into generic cases. Taken up by the media and other public realms, these cases become social problems. The reflexivity made possible through symbolic codes and abstraction reveal how the experience of captivity has influenced social change.

Keywords: Memoirs, Personal Trials, Social Fears, Reflexivity, Captivity Narratives, literature

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The phenomenon of captivity encompasses many kinds of experience, including kidnapping for ransom or political ends, abduction by strangers, abduction by non-custodial parents, human trafficking, and more. When young women are abducted by strangers, the events typically garner extensive media attention. For instance, in May 2013, Michelle Knight, Amanda Berry, and Gina DeJesus escaped from the Cleveland home of Ariel Castro after enduring 11, 10, and 9 years of captivity, respectively. The story (Schwartz) became one of the top ten of the year (AP Poll). After a period of privacy and silence, the three women appeared in televised interviews. They subsequently made book deals with co-authors and publishers (Berry, DeJesus, and Sullivan; Knight and Burford). News of their release brought Jaycee Lee Dugard back into the spotlight for commentary and interviews (“Jaycee Dugard and Elizabeth Smart offer comments on Cleveland case”; Dabrowski). In 1991, Phillip Garrido and his wife, Nancy, abducted then eleven-year-old Dugard as she walked to catch her school bus. Dugard recounted her eighteen years in captivity in *A Stolen Life*. Her book sold over 175,000 copies upon release in July 2011 (Schillaci). When Diane Sawyer interviewed Dugard for ABC, over 15 million viewers watched (Carter). News of the Cleveland captives also placed renewed attention on Elizabeth Smart, abducted by Brian David Mitchell in 2002. Mitchell held Smart captive for nine months, keeping her shackled much of the time, repeatedly raping her, and making her his “wife.” Smart’s book, *My Story*, ranked second on *The New York Times* non-fiction best-seller list immediately after publication in October 2013. [An interview with Meredith Vieira on NBC](#) followed the release of the book. Smart made subsequent television appearances with Anderson Cooper, Oprah Winfrey, and Nancy Grace, among others. Her media presence also included an interview with [Terry Gross on National Public Radio’s “Fresh Air”](#) and a feature article in *The New Yorker* (Talbot).

The stories told by kidnapping survivors, along with the attention they receive, constitute the contemporary version of a phenomenon with deep roots in American society. The “captivity narrative” originated with the accounts of colonists and settlers, especially white women, abducted by Native Americans. Often referred to simply as the “captivities,” the genre includes Mary White Rowlandson’s account entitled, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God Together, with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed*, a best-seller at the turn of the seventeenth century. Rowlandson describes how, on February 20, 1676, she and her three children were among twenty-four residents taken captive by Narragansetts after a raid on Lancaster, Massachusetts. Although she endured violent treatment at the hands of her captors, Rowlandson’s status as a minister’s wife meant a potentially high ransom, and thus spared her from much of the physical abuse inflicted on other prisoners. After eleven weeks, the Indians exchanged Rowlandson for a ransom. Her two older children soon joined her, reuniting the living members of the family. Rowlandson’s subsequent narrative, and others of the era, had wide appeal among American and English readers alike.

The attention garnered by captivity narratives points out that, “from time to time enormous numbers of people sharing little in the way of practical experiences or world views unite in

cognitive and emotional evaluations of events that lie outside their own lives,” according to sociologist Donileen Loseke (12). This essay investigates this phenomenon. It asks how socially circulating stories such as the captivities unite people in this way. In other words, how do narratives generate shared ways of thinking and feeling among audiences who otherwise have little in common?

On many levels, the captivities offer insight into the meaning-making activities of the settings from which they emerge. Sociologist Margaret Somers writes that, as the primary means through which people “come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world” (600), narratives provide insight into the construction of reality on several analytic levels. Although people create many kinds of meaning through narrative, research tends to focus on the narrative construction of personal identity. Yet, personal narratives emerge in a historical setting and reflect a cultural context. Sociologist Donileen Loseke offers an analytic framework that investigates this narrative reflexivity, or “how different types of narrative identity influence one another in the ongoing social world” (677). Loseke distinguishes macro-level narratives, which produce cultural identities in the form of recognizable “types” of people, from meso-level narratives, which produce organizational and institutional identities, and from micro-level narratives, or those that produce personal identities. Examining the reflexivity of narratives on different levels reveals the influence of culture on subjectivity.

Using Loseke’s sociologically informed framework, we discuss the insight the captivities offer into narrative reflexivity. Whereas other scholars have examined the genre, structure, and style of the captivities (Carleton; Minter; Pearce), their influence on nation, race, and gender (Castiglia; Derounian “Puritan Orthodoxy,” *Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives*; Ebersole; Fitzpatrick; Haberly; Strong; Toulouse), their production and distribution (Derounian, “The Publication”), and the cultural work the captivities do (Tompkins), we contribute sociological insights regarding narrative reflexivity to this body of research. We first examine the intersection of socially circulating meanings and subjective experience by showing how personal narratives of captivity deploy resources from the cultural level. Then, we show how the captivities influence social change through the process of abstraction. Abstraction becomes a key mechanism in narrative reflexivity, helping address the question of “how, under what circumstances, and in what ways do particular narratives migrate from one realm of social life to another?” (Loseke 677).

For this paper, we limit our focus to three cases of captivity. Along with Rowlandson’s account, arguably the best known of the early captivities, we use the contemporary cases of Dugard and Smart. Both represent cases of “stereotypical kidnapping,” or abduction by strangers, both of which occurred in the United States, during childhood. Both were high profile cases. For example, we searched the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Los Angeles Times* for stories related to captivity, abduction, or kidnapping in the United States from 2000 and 2013 (to capture a period from before Smart’s abduction up to the release of the Cleveland captives). Of the 695 stories appearing during this period, Smart’s case received the most coverage, followed by that of Dugard. Finally, both Dugard and Smart wrote memoirs, and interviews in which they recount their experiences are widely available.

Symbolic Codes in Personal Narratives

We suggest that the captivities connect subjectivity with culture through widely circulating “symbolic codes” (Loseke 665). Reflecting on what Émile Durkheim called the “collective conscience” of an era, or the beliefs a given society holds in common, symbolic codes encompass deeply held beliefs about how the world works and how people should respond in given situations. Sociologist Joseph Davis argues that symbolic codes resonate with “what audiences think they know, what they value, what they regard as appropriate and promising” (Davis 17-18). Examples of symbolic codes include “individualism,” “the American dream,” “victim,” and “survivor.” Symbolic codes make stories tellable, or understandable by audiences who see the formula and characters as believable (Bruner; Labov). A story worth telling need not have extraordinary or surprising content, but it must engage its audience. As sociologists Leslie Irvine, Jennifer Pierce, and Robert Zussman explain, stories locate listeners as subjects. Through particular images, metaphors, and story lines, audiences accept, reject, ignore, or improve upon the positions the narrative makes available to them. In short, an all-purpose, one-size-fits-all story does not exist. Symbolic codes that make a story tellable for some audiences might not be well received by others. Moreover, symbolic codes place implicit limitations on and sanctions for telling particular stories at particular times.

A brief comparison of the early captivities with contemporary versions illustrates how symbolic codes create reflexivity across the personal and cultural levels. In this case, consider how the symbolic code of “trauma” forms a building block in the captivities. The early narratives recorded little of what would appeal to contemporary audiences, such as graphic sexual details and insight into the psychological states of the author. Instead, through the structural devices of the sermon, the devotional text, and the jeremiad, all forms familiar to Puritan audiences (Ebersole; Fitzpatrick), the captivities translate traumatic experience into a test of faith. For example, Rowlandson portrays adversity as corrective and ultimately beneficial. Her experience led her to acknowledge her sinfulness and see captivity as both punishment and instruction. In describing the hardships and abuse she encountered while traveling with the Indians, she uses her experiences as vehicles for understanding what biblical figures such as Job endured. Moreover, because Rowlandson and other authors of the captivities wrote or told their stories retrospectively, after escape or ransom, they often employ symbolic codes of providential deliverance. For example, when Rowlandson complains about having to carry a heavy load during the Twelfth Remove, she says only, “I lifted up my heart to God, hoping the redemption was not far off.” Redemption served as a symbolic code for the journey of the Puritan soul and the mission in the New World. Overall, the symbolic codes of the early narratives reflected and reproduced beliefs about the power of faith and the importance of practicing godliness in everyday life. As Gary L. Ebersole explains, “captivity was an important metaphor used to describe the ontological and spiritual condition of humankind before the first New England Puritan was ever captured by Indians” (9).

Whereas the depictions offered in the early captivities verged on inspirational formula stories, expectations of what counts as trauma to a female captive have changed dramatically. Contemporary audiences expect a significant amount of intimate detail. Thus, when Dugard

describes how Garrido made her “touch his penis and stroke it up and down,” adding that “sometimes he wants me to suck on it, too” (52), she writes for an audience familiar with sexual trauma. Moreover, her audience expects such a level of disclosure, even while experiencing shock and disgust over what is revealed. Dugard spares few details. She describes learning not to struggle when Garrido rapes her, for example, explaining, “It hurts more when I try to struggle, so I try not to get away from him, but it’s hard not to want to push away from his sweaty disgusting body” (53). and recounts the soreness she felt after the first of Garrido’s “runs”—his term for the drug-fueled sexual abuse lasting for several days.

Smart’s book omits the graphic details that Dugard provides, but the narrative nevertheless draws on the symbolic code of trauma. Describing what Mitchell called her “wedding night,” Smart recalls, “I fought and kicked and struggled. I did everything I could. But he was a powerful and driven man. There was nothing I could do. When it was over, he got up and crawled out of the tent, leaving me crying on the floor” (45). She uses the term “rape” almost as shorthand; while revealing that it occurred every day, she omits the particulars. It is worth noting that whereas Dugard herself wrote *A Stolen Life*, Smart’s *My Story* was written by Republican congressman Chris Stewart, who, like Smart, is a Latter-day Saint. Although no clear evidence connects the book’s modest approach to the Mormon faith, it could explain the lack of detail in this regard. As Robert Zussman has written in “Narrative Freedom,” whereas “some resources provide an ability to speak, others provide an exemption from speaking” (822). In Smart’s case, Mormonism could serve a resource for narrative silence.

In our analysis of the memoirs by Dugard and Smart, the second most important code, “childhood,” encompasses the naïveté and powerlessness one might expect of young girls. Because of their ages at the time of abduction, Dugard and Smart can justifiably depict themselves as naïve. Taken captive at ages eleven and fourteen respectively, both could reasonably assume that audiences would not question their innocence. Yet both repeatedly emphasize their inexperience. For instance, early in *My Story*, Smart writes, “in almost every way, I was still a little girl. One thing that I can say for certain is that I didn’t understand the world” (7). She refers to herself as a “little girl” an additional 18 times in the book. Later, she recalls, “I was as naïve as any fourteen-year-old girl could be” (159). Similarly, when Dugard recounts the first time Garrido assaulted her, she writes that, “the word ‘rape’ was not in my vocabulary. Today that makes me feel terrible for that little naïve girl. She is still a part of me and at times she comes out and makes me feel small and helpless again” (32). When Dugard describes how Garrido “seemed like a nice guy” when he was not assaulting her, she follows by saying, “I was naïve and desperately lonely” (33).

The symbolic codes of trauma and childhood work in the narratives by allowing audiences to identify with the captives on one dimension or another. As Loseke writes, “even the most widely shared symbolic codes are not shared by all and must be interpreted through individual sensemaking” (666). The reader, or listener, can find a way into the story because of the fluidity contained in the codes. The characteristics that make up the symbolic code of trauma exist on a continuum along which audiences can understand any of the tellers’ actions. The combination of traits encompassed in the code of childhood, such as naïveté and innocence, reinforces a

widely circulating image of young girls. By portraying these characteristics as part of a “stock” image of American girlhood, we do not intend to challenge the truth-value of Dugard’s and Smart’s claims. Instead, we highlight narrative reflexivity, or how personal stories simultaneously depict individual experience and resonate with cultural meanings beyond the scope of captivity.

Abstraction: From Indian Abduction to Missing (White Female) Children

In addition to symbolic codes, narrative reflexivity also involves the process of abstraction, which allows narratives produced in one context to accomplish cultural work in others. Abstraction removes detail and reduces the specific to the general (Rosen). It distills a phenomenon to its basic qualities or characteristics and removes it from its original setting. Abstraction can occur in various public realms, including the media, political speeches, web content, and court documents. In the colonial captivities, abstraction occurred in the pulpit. Puritan leaders used abstraction to make the distinct aspects of Indian abduction secondary to the general spiritual message. They depicted captivity as God’s collective punishment on what Christians call a “backslidden” people, or those who have fallen away from the path of righteousness. Granted, New England clergymen were concerned about the “Indian problem,” but they were equally, if not more concerned about the increasing worldliness and “spiritual degeneracy” they observed within their flocks, as Pauline Turner Strong has written (118-128). Through abstraction, Puritan leaders “could point to the representative quality of the woman captive’s experience; she did not stand for women’s experience alone, but, viewed in Scriptural terms, for the experience of the entire colony,” as Teresa A. Toulouse explains (7).

Abstraction allowed the use of the narratives in the internal and external political conflicts in the colonies. In the abstract, captivity became political propaganda, rousing anti-Indian, anti-French, or anti-Catholic hatred, or discontent with colonial administration. For example, the publication or republication of the captivities often coincided with periods of conflict within Massachusetts or between English and colonial governments. Rowlandson’s narrative did not appear immediately after her release in 1676, but eight years later, during administrative chaos in the colony that culminated in the revocation of its charter. After several more changes in government, including a new charter and the failure of the first governor, Cotton Mather recounted Hannah Dustan’s narrative “in three different venues at three different moments of political transition in Massachusetts” (Toulouse 5). On the first occasion, he appended the narrative of another captive, Hannah Swarton. By blaming Swarton’s captivity on the then-royal governor, Mather used her experience to advocate for a governor born in the colonies.

The conventions of the captivities made them applicable not only within the context of Puritan society, but later, in a secular context, too, by influencing the rhetoric leading to the American Revolution. In the 1770s, Rowlandson’s narrative and others enjoyed renewed popularity. Transformed into a metaphor for the Revolution, captivity defined an American national character, according to Christopher Castiglia and Greg Sieminski. The captivities were avidly consumed by secular readers. The theme of captivity became so successfully politicized and so closely linked with the image of the American character that Benjamin Franklin proposed a

captivity scene for the design of the Great Seal of the United States. After the Revolution, the popularity of the narratives waned for several decades. As Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola and Victoria Smith explain, captivity narratives became popular again from the 1830s through the 1880s, when used to justify American expansion onto Indian lands and promote government protection from raids on frontier forts and settlements.

After the threat of Indian abduction diminished, the topic of captivity virtually disappeared from American literature and media. It reappeared in 1924, with the abduction and murder of fourteen-year-old Bobby Franks by Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb. The incident constitutes the first of several child abductions that occurred through the 1920s and 30s, the most famous of which was the kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh, Jr. Although the Lindbergh case established child abduction in the American consciousness, media reports of actual incidents remained rare until 1979 when Etan Patz, then age six, disappeared in New York City. Several subsequent cases brought the issue to prominence and created the social phenomenon of “missing children” (Best *Threatened Children*, “Rhetoric in Claims making”; Fritz and Altheide; Gentry). According to sociologist Joel Best (“Missing Children”), chief among these was the highly publicized kidnapping and murder of six-year-old Adam Walsh in 1981. Walsh’s parents created the non-profit Adam Walsh Child Resource Center, dedicated to legislative reform. Their efforts helped pass the Missing Children Act, the Missing Children’s Assistance Act, and the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the missing child was white and male. This began to change in the 1990s with reports of the abduction of Jaycee Lee Dugard in 1991, the abduction and murder of twelve-year-old Polly Klaas in 1993, and of nine-year-old Amber Hagerman in 1996. Media attention to the topic spiked dramatically with Elizabeth Smart’s disappearance in 2002 and her recovery in 2003. The Smart case “revived child abductions in the national news media agenda” (Muschert et al. 15).

In the contemporary context, abstraction left the meaning of “missing child” vague. Joel Best explains that the criteria for both “missing” and “child” were broad and inclusive, specifying neither “the age at which one stops being a child, or the length of time a child must be gone to be considered missing” (“Rhetoric in Claimsmaking” 105). Moreover, the criteria did not identify what would constitute going “missing.” Abstraction allowed it to connote harm of various kinds. The Missing Children’s Assistance Act of 1984 had given the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention the task of [gathering data](#) on the extent of child abduction. This resulted in the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children, known as “NISMART” and “NISMART-2.” The studies distinguish three categories of child abductions: *family abduction*, *non-family abduction*, and *stereotypical kidnapping*, a subset of non-family abduction in which a stranger holds a child overnight, transports the child over 50 miles away, or intends to keep or kill the child. According to NISMART-2, most missing child cases involve abductions by family members over custody disputes. Most of the stories appearing in the media, however, involve “newsworthy but atypical cases” of stereotypical kidnapping (Muschert et al. 24). The degree of reportage on such cases “diverges greatly from the incidence estimates in the NISMART-2 studies” (Muschert et al. 19).

According to Rebecca Wanzo, the media focus on cases such as Smart's and Dugard's also misrepresents the missing child as female and white. According to NISMART-2, over half of missing children are boys. Seong-Jae Min and John C. Feaster report that nearly half of the children reported missing in 2002, when Smart was abducted, were racial minorities. The disappearance of seven-year old Alexis Patterson just one month before Smart's abduction received scant media coverage. Patterson, an African American girl, disappeared while walking to her inner-city school and has not been seen since. Wanzo's research reveals that Patterson's abduction garnered little local, much less national, media attention. In claiming that "lost white girls make better stories," Wanzo (109) highlights the role of symbolic codes and the construction of childhood. Because the media's task is to shape stories that resonate with their audiences, they favor the code of the lost, innocent, white girl.

Once established as a problem, with policies in place to address it, organizations dedicated to "missing children" emerged. Notably, both Dugard and Smart formed non-profit organizations with identities that rely on abstraction. For example, the website of Dugard's [JAYC Foundation](#) states its goal is to help people who "have suffered a familial or nonfamilial abduction or other trauma." The [Elizabeth Smart Foundation](#) has a similar noble, albeit vague aim of "preventing crimes from happening to children." The abstraction that characterizes both mission statements allows the organizations to cast a wide-mesh net over various social problems.

Conclusion

This essay has used the stories of missing children and Indian abduction to examine "how narratives work and the work narratives do" (Loseke 622). While acknowledging the limitations of using only these narrative cases, our analysis nevertheless reveals two mechanisms through which narratives reflect and shape shared meanings. Through culturally relevant symbolic codes, captivity narratives make personal experience widely recognizable. Through abstraction, captivity has represented vulnerability to hostile others, whether in the form of Indians, the devil, unjust rulers, or predatory strangers. Abstraction allows the use of captivity as spiritual, political, or moral discourse. Through abstraction, personal narratives that employ symbolic codes return those codes to circulation in new forms, to suit new social contexts. In the abstract, the narrative told by the kidnapping victim fuels the phenomenon of missing children.

Beyond the domain of captivity narratives, further analysis of symbolic codes and abstraction can reveal the reflexive process of narrative production and reproduction. Symbolic codes allow narratives to simultaneously reflect collectively recognized images and ideas and make individual experience tellable and understandable. This reflexive relationship illustrates the links between the micro- and macro-levels of society, or between personal meaning and social structure. In this way, narratives that construct personal identity also shape public discourse and policy by creating types of actors, defining problems, and prescribing solutions.

In sum, symbolic codes and abstraction contribute to the circulation of individual and social experience across ontological and epistemological domains. By drawing on the symbolic codes

of trauma and childhood, the former captives are able to interpret a complex, powerful, and horrifying experience in a way that is both subjectively meaningful and socially acceptable. This interpretation is circulated to the broader public via the publication of memoirs and through the broadcast of the accounts of the captives' experience to millions of viewers. These specific accounts of captivity are, in turn, consumed by the public, abstracted from their original context, and acted upon in different arenas of social life. Symbolic codes and abstraction, are, then, consequential in answering basic questions about how meaning is distributed and becomes available across different domains of social life.

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