NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

Children's Psychosocial Narratives in "Found Childhoods"

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This paper focuses on a proliferating narrative genre: videos where children are central, posted on the internet for public consumption. The video analyzed is of a pre-school U.S. Black girl resisting how her mother has combed her hair. It offers insights into family practices and display (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011) that would usually not be open to scrutiny and cannot be captured in the same way in interviews. The paper argues that the videoed narrative can only be understood if the sociocultural context of racism and contestation over the denigration of Black girls' and women's Afro hair is analyzed.

Keywords:
Afro hair; family display; family practices; found childhoods; racism; small story; sociocultural context

One of the reasons that narrative research and analysis has burgeoned over the last two decades is its characteristic methodological and substantive openness (Riessman, 1993). In recent years, definitions of "narrative" have become looser and less definitive (Andrews et al., 2013; Squire et al., 2014). However, sequence and selection of events to make meaning for specific audiences remains important, as does the notion that narratives are produced by, and productive of, various identities (Riessman, 2008). A major theme in Riessman's work is that narratives are frequently developed when there are ruptures, when lives are "interrupted," and people strive to account for the ways in which they fail to fit the canon (Riessman, 1993, 2002, 2008). Equally, narratives are

performative, so that narrative analysis shows what narratives do in terms of the actions they accomplish (Schiff, 2012).

The range of narrative methodologies has also expanded so that, as Squire et al. (2014) highlight, they "may involve writing, verbal or other sounds, or visual, acted, built or made elements that similarly convey meaning" (p. 5). Riessman (e.g., 2015) has contributed to the increasing breadth of narrative research through the range of methods she employs, including interviews in translation, popular cultural readings, illness narratives, diary analysis, and autoethnography.

In keeping with Riessman's commitment continually to expand the focus of narrative research, this paper focuses on a narrative from a preschool Black girl that is co-constructed with her mother, filmed by her father, and placed on the internet for public consumption. It first discusses the notion of "found narratives" and then analyses the narrative, showing how it is psychosocial in requiring understanding of both the minutiae of the co-constructed interaction and a wider sociopolitical frame.

Extending Narrative Analysis to Children's "Found Narratives"

Burman (2019a) suggests that one way of approaching understanding of childhood is through researching the diverse forms and interpretations of childhood produced through cultural markings:

> Like seashells, driftwood or pebbles exhibited as art, found childhood attends to relics of the cultural marking of developmental time that inhabit material environments. What defines an object of childhood thereby becomes a matter of interrogation rather than being assumed a priori. (p. 2)

Burman's notion of "found childhood" fits with an approach she calls "child as method" (2018), designed to locate childhood within its wider social relations. Burman (2019b) suggests that "'child' and 'development' are linked across economic, sociocultural and individual trajectories," and that a focus on "child as method" can help to illuminate these interlinkages (p. 4).

One increasingly common way in which childhood is currently being marked as part of developmental time is through the fragments of childhood "found" on internet sites, a side effect of the affordances (Gibson, 1977) of mobile phone technology and social media. These are increasingly common as parents post videos of their children. Such videos

are generally on aspects of children's lives and achievements that parent(s) find remarkable in some way, either because they are considered particularly "sweet," droll, clever, or precocious. Often, they are set up for adults to laugh at/with children, sometimes at the children's expense if they are recorded being startled, upset, or demonstrating naiveté. While those children who are part of internet generations are "natural" in front of cameras, these "found narratives" tell complicated stories about children's, parents', and families' lives, because they are private, insider records, selectively filmed and posted by parent(s) without children's informed consent. They are necessarily fragments of talk, performance and interaction fashioned for and from the medium used. In this, they are not necessarily different from the stories told in interviews that are sometimes fragmentary and constructed to give particular emphases and perspectives, with idiosyncratic starting and end points negotiated by the teller. We know little about how children experience having been posted on the internet, either at the time or when they are teenagers or adults. A notable exception is the highly influential 2007 "Charlie bit me" YouTube video posted apparently inadvertently by the father of two British boys (then aged three and one) as he tried to upload it privately for the children's grandfather in the U.S.A. It has been viewed over 870 million times and apparently earned the family more than $100,000. The boys and their father have appeared on various media programs in many countries, each proclaiming their enthusiasm for the posting and celebrating its anniversary ("Charlie," 2020).

Whatever children feel, the stories told by such postings are open for analysis and provide contemporary insights into family lives and practices (Elliott et al., 2020). They parallel the ways in which children are captured in "fly-on-the-wall" and longitudinal documentaries. Both types of material have been analyzed as fruitful ways to understand children's meaning-making processes (Phoenix, 2019; Phoenix, 2020). They bring together "small" and "big" story approaches in ways that are increasingly recognized to be complementary (Bamberg, 2011; Freeman, 2011). In doing so, they enable "small story" analyses of interactions, identities in process, and the everyday, and "big story" foci on canonical narratives and sociocultural contexts. The analyses below show that narratives are multilevel, with small and big stories, micro and macro analysis simultaneously possible in the same set of narrative accounts.

A Child's Small Story about Her Hairdo

The video analyzed below was selected because it is an example of a relatively new, but now common, narrative genre for children. These consist of internet videos, where children present narratives that some parents prolong, clarify, record, and post on the internet (Phoenix, 2020). It is a video of a pre-school U.S. Black girl, resisting how her mother has combed her hair. As such, it offers insights into family practices and display (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011) that would usually not be open to scrutiny and could not be captured in the same way in interviews. The extract below is my transcript of the video posting in which most of the narrative meaning is captured in the co-constructed exchanges between her mother (who is never visible) and the girl:

"Twist It: When a father realises that his baby is hilarious": Transcript of Black girl and mother filmed by father (Daniels Therapy, 2017):

1.	**Girl**	No (turning away, perhaps to put a cup on a table).
2.	**Mother**	Why not?
3.	**Girl**	Cos!
4.	**Mother**	I think it looks cute.
5.	**Girl**	I don't. (Older child's voice off camera: *"I do."*)
6.	**Mother**	Why don't you like it?
7.	**Girl**	Because I don't like it and I don't want to wear it outside. It's cos everyone is going to laugh at me and make (sic) my hairdo.
8.	**Mother**	Why would you think people would laugh at your hairdo? It looks cute.
9.	**Girl**	It doesn't. If you wanna h-- I can make a hairdo like just like this and you can go outside like that.
10.	**Mother**	But I don't have that much hair, so my hair won't do that. (Pause) But you're making a choice for yourself. Is that what you're saying?
11.	**Girl**	Yes, I'm making a choice by ***my***self. (Pause) So I can have a better hairdo.
12.	**Mother**	Well what would you like for me to do with your hair if you don't want to wear it like=
13.	**Girl**	=Twist it (turns away).

The video posted has been viewed almost 83,000 times but is accompanied by little contextual information. The poster, Daniels Therapy, aptly entitled it "Twist it!" and includes the description, "When a father realises that his baby is hilarious," indicating that it was filmed by the father. The notion that the exchange is humorous chimes with the common tendency to trivialize children's concerns and view them as entertaining, even when they are troubled (Waksler, 1996). The unnamed girl looks about four years old, but this is not stated. She is from the U.S. and is in her pajamas. Unlike some other videos posted of young girls talking to their mothers, this has not been picked up by the media and I found no internet comments on it.

   The short (50 seconds), 13-turn exchange above is, in many ways, unremarkable. In a sequence of interactional moves, the girl remonstrates with her mother about the Afro hairstyle she is wearing and demands a different style. Her responses tell a "small story" about the importance of style, even to young children's identities and to their feelings of being accepted within their everyday cultures. Her story develops and is buttressed through her mother's gentle, interested interrogation that, at the same time, sets up a counter-narrative that her daughter's Afro is "cute." However, the narrative process of meaning-making is more complex than appears at first sight and is only partially intelligible without understanding of the macrosocial context alongside the interactional context between this mother, child, silently-filming father, and invisible older child who makes one interjection. Reading the extract in the absence of the video recording serves to highlight why visual and spoken/written narratives are often co-dependent, for there is relatively little indication of what the girl's hair looks like or what she looks like from the talk itself.

   As in any narrative, the above extract has a starting point that is not chosen by the child herself, because it begins only when the filming begins. It therefore gives insights into the context and meaning of the narratives for the parents. The first turn, "No," from the child, signals that this interaction is already in mid-flow. The implication is that the cameraperson considered the developing sequence sufficiently important and/or novel that he (the father?) turned on his camera. We do not know if the parents expected these responses and deliberately set up the interaction as an example of their daughter's cuteness or precocity. However, the fact that the opening question is not presented suggests that this was spontaneous and opportunistic, rather than staged. Whatever the

reason, the parents clearly thought the video sufficiently noteworthy for public consumption.

We see the girl speaking emphatically and apparently displaying resistance as she faces someone we do not see but assume to be her mother. As narrative scholars agree, narratives are produced from particular perspectives for specific listeners (Riessman, 2008). In this case, the child speaking addresses herself to her mother and both take for granted some shared knowledge and co-construct a narrative that is produced because the girl's perspective diverges from her mother's and that of an older child heard only once (saying "*I* do").

At the start of the video and transcript, it is clear that the child has been asked a question that she is direct, but monosyllabic, in answering. She is equally non-expansive in her responses until turn 6. We do not know initially what "it" is. We are taken straight into shared insider talk that excludes the viewer. The mother's responses are gentle, apparently aiming to gain an understanding of her daughter's refusal, but adding her own opinion: "I think it looks cute" (turn 4). The response from the child repeats her assertive negation in opposition to her mother. Her statement in the 5th turn could end the conversation, because it does not invite response. However, in turn 6, the mother again invites a reason for dislike of "it" by elaborating her question to "Why don't you like it?" This produces a longer, more evocative statement from the girl and one that brings together personal and social concerns, social relations, difference, and conflict in ways that are psychosocial and emotionally marked: "Because I don't like it and I don't want to wear it outside. It's cos everyone is going to laugh at me and make (sic) my hairdo."

The girl starts this 7th turn by reiterating that she does not like "it" and goes on to draw an implicit contrast between "outside," which she mentions, and inside. It is only "outside" that she does not want to wear what we learn for the first time is her "hairdo," which is visible in the video as an Afro. The reason she gives—because "everyone" is going to laugh at her and make fun of her hairdo—is highly explanatory, giving insights into her processes of meaning-making. Since she is talking to her mother, we can assume that the inside she implicitly invokes is their home where the filmed interaction takes place, which is constructed as a haven against being laughed at for her hairdo. She appears to be aware of what is likely to subject her to laughter from "everyone," and finds this sufficiently aversive to want to avoid risking it. Ironically, the film on the internet does what she was attempting to avoid by opening this intimate

"inside" interaction to a much broader "outside" audience than she was imagining.

In response, her mother (turn 8) attempts once more to clarify her daughter's narrative. This is a common feature of mother-child interactions, where mothers scaffold children's social, emotional, and cognitive understanding in what Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development (Yuill & Little, 2018). Her daughter's forceful response, "I can make a hairdo like—just like this and you can go outside like that," seems a non-sequitur. However, it allows the child proleptically to defend herself against her mother's potential disbelief and reinforces her account by suggesting that if her mother does not believe her, she herself can get empirical proof. This adds to the strength of her co-constructed narrative, which is sophisticated in showing that she can both engage in perspective-taking and has a theory of mind, understanding what would convince her mother.

The mother's next turn (10) is her longest, and is elicited because her daughter seems to have finished with this discussion and does not respond to her mother's explanation that she does not have sufficiently long hair to have that hairstyle. Faced with a non-response, but continued visual engagement, the mother changes tack, saying after a pause: "But you're making a choice *for* yourself. Is that what you're saying?" The switch from making an explanatory statement to, once again, asking a clarifying question imputes agency and legitimizes choice. Her question elicits an emphatic response, accompanied by head wagging: "Yes, I'm making a choice *by* myself. (Pause) So I can have a better hairdo." This response makes a shift from "choice *for* yourself" to "choice *by* myself" and underlines that the girl's choice is not to wear an Afro. When her mother does not immediately respond, she adds the reason "So I can have a better hairdo." This appears to signal the end of the narrative, putting a Labovian-style coda at the end of the narrative in closure and giving a reason and a desired future outcome. However, her mother reopens the narrative by asking what her daughter wants her to do with her hair (turn 12). This is the first time that there has been mention that it is the mother who does the child's hair. This indication of maternal agency and control gives some indication of why the child is assertive in speaking to her mother. Her response is terse and she accompanies the word "Twists" as her chosen style with blinking her eyes and turning away, which marks the end of the video recording.

The small story to be analyzed from this 13-turn interaction both shows and explains that hairstyles are emotionally marked and

consequential. The preschooler in this video explains that she fears being laughed at for her hairdo. She does not say if she has experienced this, but she signals her determination to avoid this by not wanting to go "outside" wearing an Afro. Her mother co-constructs the small story with her and ends by accepting that her daughter has ideas about choosing her own hairstyle, both recognizing and according her daughter agency. From a narrative perspective, this small story shows the child's desire for a better future (with a more desirable hairstyle) different from the present and perhaps built from an unsatisfactory past, where she has found her hairstyle risible. The story is as much about the mother as it is about the child's assertion of her views. The mother listens to the child and accepts her narrative as legitimate even though she disagrees and may have political reasons (gendered and anti-racist) for encouraging her daughter to see her natural Afro hair as beautiful. As a "found" narrative of childhood (Burman, 2019a), this extract is productive in enabling "small story" analysis of interactions, identities in process, and the everyday.

Contextualizing the Small Story in the Macro Narrative of Afro Hair

While the extract analyzed is undoubtedly a "small story," it is increasingly recognized that productive social analysis requires a focus on both "small" and "big" stories. (Freeman, 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2015). Squire (2011) points out the importance of "treating narratives as politically active texts and practices" and of addressing the politics of personal stories (p. 7). However, as recognized in political narrative research, the canonical story of the culture is highly organizing of what is told, even if this is not recognized or acknowledged (Andrews, 2014). Riessman's notion that narratives are frequently developed when our stories fail to fit what is expected in the culture is relevant here. In order to understand the meaning of the extract above, therefore, we need to interrogate the connections that both the child and her mother make and their implicit as well as explicit meaning-making (Riessman, 2008). This means that their narrative interactions need to be analyzed within their cultural milieu with a focus on why a story was told in the way it was (Riessman, 2001) and how the social world is visible in personal narratives (Riessman, 2011).

As Mills (1959) said long ago, what we call "personal troubles"' are located in particular times and places, and individuals' narratives about their troubles are works of history, as much as they are about individuals, the social spaces they inhabit, and the societies they live in:

> A participant's understandings of her "troubles" contain the seeds of her social analysis that, in turn, can be interpreted for the ways it supports and/or undermines larger systems of domination. (Riessman, 2011, p. 3)

Following Tamboukou (2015), it is important to analyze the Foucauldian "conditions of possibility" that produced the child's account and the chain of signification that links her account to the wider social context. While neither the girl nor her mother allude to politics, Black women's hairstyles in the U.S. (and elsewhere) are racialized and the subject of political struggle.

Discrimination based on hair texture is a form of social injustice, found worldwide, that targets Black people, specifically Black people who have Afro-textured hair that has not been chemically straightened. Universally, Afro-textured hair has frequently been seen as being unprofessional, unattractive, and unclean ("Discrimination," 2020).

Black girls and women wearing natural hair have long been subjected to public scrutiny, censure, and stigmatization (Tate, 2016). Numerous Black women and girls in the U.S. have been excluded from school and employment for their hairstyle choices (King, 2018). For example, "In 2017, a preparatory academy in Montverde, Florida, asked a Black teenage girl to change her natural hair because it violated the school's dress code; and in 2018, a middle-school student in Gretna, Louisiana was removed from school due to her braided extensions" (Griffin, 2019). It was only in 2019 that the New York City Commission on Human Rights ruled that residents have the legal right to wear their hair in locs, Afros, braids, and other culturally specific styles. The California legislature followed by passing a bill banning discrimination against natural Black hairstyles in the workplace. However, most states still allow this form of discrimination (Griffin, 2019).

This is not simply an issue in the U.S.A. In 2016, a South African investigative report found that teachers at Pretoria High school for girls had violated the dignity of Black girl students by punishing them if they refused to straighten their hair and making racist comments about their appearance. Similarly, in 2020, a mixed parentage 18-year old was awarded £8,500 in an out-of-court settlement after her family took legal action against her East London school because, over four years, she was repeatedly sent home when she wore her Afro hair in a natural style

(Virk, 2020). As Emma Dabiri (2020a), a mixed parentage PhD student from Ireland, argued:

> The UK school system has a problem with afro-textured hair. Across the country black and mixed-black pupils are being excluded because their hair is too short, too long, too big or too full. Pupils have been excluded for fades, locs, braids, natural afros and more—in effect every single style and necessary protective method for the maintenance and upkeep of afro hair has been penalised, often in the harshest possible ways. Whatever we do is never enough. (See also Dabiri, 2020b)

Given these examples, it is perhaps not surprising that Afro hair is emotionally marked for the girl in the videotape. Even if she has not already been laughed at, she clearly anticipates that Afro hair is likely to be subjected to ridicule from unnamed outsiders. It is also not surprising that her mother should be keen to discuss the reasons for her "choice" and to make clear that she thinks it "cute," or that the older child should also say so. Black girls and women have long resisted the stigmatization of Black natural hair and resistance is gaining momentum (Dabiri, 2020b; Phelps-Ward & Laura, 2016). It is likely that the mother would know this and, if supportive of that movement, have an agenda to encourage her daughter to wear and like her Afro hair.

This pre-schooler's narrative is, therefore, politically salient and the co-construction with her mother invokes "big narratives," even though neither allude to these. Analysis of the broad context within which they are positioned allows us to see the process by which big psychosocial narratives might be constructed. These include the girl's nascent awareness of hierarchies and inequalities of age, racialization, socioeconomic positioning, identities, and knowledge. The video allows us insight into everyday learning of racialized positioning, the policing of acceptable looks outside and inside the home, and recognition of parental double standards (i.e., that her mother does not wear Afro hair). It also gives us insights into children's understanding that how their looks will be received can be epistemically violent (Foucault, 1977; Spivak, 1999).

Concluding Thoughts

The analysis of the above transcript shows that "found childhoods" (Burman 2019a) can be analyzed in children's co-constructed

narratives posted online. These situate the child above in a web of social relations that illuminate big and small stories, macro- and micro-narratives (Riessman, 1993). It demonstrates the articulation of parent-child dynamics and the ways in which the personal narrative of self, body, and identity is infused with political meanings not only for adults but also for children. The insights this analysis allows include how identities that are unsatisfactory can be reworked to provide new versions (Hall, 1996). They also show how, even in the preschool period, children who find themselves at risk of being excluded from their culture's canonical narratives of what it is to be an acceptable girl, can produce narratives designed to help construct "liveable lives" for themselves (Butler, 2004). This is, of course, not the final story, since childhood experiences are remade and relived through memories and stories within and outside families (Andrews, 2014) as well as being reinterpreted in the light of new experiences. However, it is an illuminating vignette of power relations in families and beyond, raising important questions about parenting, intergenerational life, and possibilities for both socio-political transmission and change.

The complexity that analysis of this 50-second, 13-turn exchange enables indicates that "found childhoods" provide stories that are helpful resources for research (Meretoja, 2017; Schiff, 2012) and build on Riessman's (1993, 2008, 2011) commitment to methodological and substantive innovation.

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