

Harrison C. White, Frédéric Godart

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Stories from Identity and Control

by Harrison C. White *and* Frédéric C. Godart

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Introduction

In an influential article, Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin [1994, 1447] spell out what constitutes for them the limits of any approach based on “social networks”: “Our own position is that a truly synthetic account of social processes and transformations that takes into consideration not only structural but also cultural and discursive factors will necessarily entail a fuller conception of social action than has been provided thus far by network analysts.” Exploring and conceptualizing the relationship between social structure and culture is certainly a major object of inquiry for social theory [e.g. Swidler 2001]. Yet, such a goal requires also considering simultaneously multiple social formations of different scopes, scales, and levels [White 1992; forthcoming].

This article does not aim at solving the social structure/culture conundrum, but rather at disentangling some of its subtleties, by defining an array of forms of discourse and by specifying their dynamic relationship with structural entities. The complexity and dynamics of culture are intertwined with the dynamics and complexity of structure, as reflected in forms of discourse. Culture and structure are constituted by participants and observers alike and can both provide useful guidance for action and research. But our lived experience is one of mixture of culture and structure.

An *identity* is triggered only out of efforts at *control* amid contingencies and contentions in interaction. Identities emerge from efforts at control in turbulent context. These control efforts need not have anything to do with coercion or domination over other identities. The root of control is finding footing in the biophysical and

social environments. Such footing is a position that entails a stance, which brings orientation in relation to other identities. The control efforts by one identity are social realities for other identities. So an identity can be perceived by others as having an unproblematic continuity in social footing, even though it is adding through its contentions with others to the contingencies they face.

Thus, social contexts assert normality that is at odds with the improvisations and stumblings in direct experience, and so news broadcasts imply that everyday life is not newsworthy. Perceived normality is a gloss on the reality of tumultuous efforts at control by identities as they seek to maintain footings. Identities achieve social footing as both a source and a destination of communications to which identities attribute *meaning*. Consequently, without footing, identities would jump around in a social space without meaning and thus without communication.

Niklas Luhmann [1995, chapter 2] lays out a subtle yet precise argument for meaning emerging in co-constitution of communication among identities. Gaining control presupposes a stable standpoint for orientation. Identity becomes a point of reference from which information can be processed and evaluated. Footings thus must be reflexive; they supply an angle of perceptions along with orientation and assessments that guide interaction with other identities, to yield control. So all these processes among identities in their footings can be understood only as an inextricable intermixture of social with cultural spreads, out of which meanings are constructed jointly. *Forms of discourse* are composed of meanings as basic components, akin to “statements” (*énoncés*) [Foucault 1972]. *Events* – that is to say, switchings in surroundings – guide identities seeking control over uncertainty and thus over fellow identities. In other words, uncertainty and contingency originating from physical and social settings trigger control attempts that lead identities to act across and among network-domains, *netdoms* for short, “dom” from domain of topics and “net” from network of relations. By doing so, identities generate some specific meanings, together with forms of discourse.

Identities relate to other identities in netdoms. Domains and networks vary in scope, above and below Bourdieu’s “field” [e.g. Bourdieu 1986] or Becker’s “world” [e.g. Becker 1982]. Identities switch from netdom to netdom, finding footings in different network-and-domain contexts. The fusion of network and domain is essential and it is a radical departure from common sense [Grabher 2006], in that we do not a priori separate social networks – the structure – from domains of topics – the culture – but instead consider them simultaneously. Networks and domains emerge from netdoms which form the fabric of our lived experience in a context of uncertainty, contingency, and ambiguity. This is dual-sided habit, as one finds in Pierre Bourdieu’s construct of *habitus* as matrix for practices and representations

[Bourdieu 1996a; 1996b]. But perception comes only with and from contrast, as a process [Gibson 1979]. In other words, it is the process of switching from netdom to netdom that generates perception, not the netdom itself.

Relying on netdoms as primary elements from which networks and domains are derived takes seriously the invitation formulated by Ann Mische and Harrison White [1998, 695] to go beyond the idea that “network relations and discursive processes (...) are dual and co-constitutive, that networks are constituted by stories, and vice versa.” “Structure” and “culture,” “social networks” and “discursive forms,” are second-order processes which need to be accounted for from the dynamics of identity and control among netdoms.

Thus, fresh meaning emerges from and for humans only with switching from netdom to netdom. Much the same root idea was found long ago in sociological works by Harold Garfinkel [e.g. 1967], Aaron Cicourel [e.g. 1980; 1987; 1991], or Erving Goffman [e.g. 1963; 1967; 1971; 1974] and in linguistics by Halliday [e.g. 1994; see also Halliday and Hasan 1976]. Recently, it is again being championed by Diane Vaughan [2002] and Ann Mische [2007; see also Mische and White 1998]. An early parallel is *Personal Knowledge* in which Michael Polanyi [1958] argues that all knowing is an essentially tacit integration of subsidiary clues, *from* which we attend, into focal wholes, *to* which we attend.

After tracing back the emergence of stories from meanings, as by-products of switchings among netdoms, we explore the institutional processes that constitute culture. We then show how narratives can be used to generate fresh action, in a context of story-lines, plots, and rhetorics. This context frames social time and organizes the froth of our lives.

Stories Are Made of Meanings

Meanings come from switchings of identities among netdoms and cumulate into *stories*, which thus become a medium for control efforts. Time spent with stories, building and hearing them in gossip for example, suggests that they are crucial in social process. Subtle, real-time interactions have many facets, and these do not necessarily require verbal expression to be a story. Hand-holding is a nonverbal way of expressing a relation. It is simultaneously very personal and yet also manifestly public, visible to anyone around; as in the case of any verbal expression, the meaning of hand-holding depends on larger cultural contexts and can be manipulated or misunderstood.

But the point is that there are whole classes of other nonverbal ways, such as glances and grunts, to express relations. Meaning need not be verbalized [Barthes 1983]. And conversely when a person strikes up a pleasant chat with a stranger at a bus stop, this does not necessarily constitute a story because such an encounter does not necessarily constitute a relation. But existing meanings are mobilized and generated through the encounter of netdoms.

Take an opposite example. Even in present society, although you may not like or seek out your cousin, this person remains known socially as your cousin. Although you do not perceive a relation to this cousin, that person is embraced by cousinhood in social reference [e.g. Nadel 1957; White 1963; Boyd 1991]. The only requisites are a domain context and a network context. Stories and relations of cousinhood exist and are mobilizable, simultaneously.

Stories, like meanings, are specific to humans. While some sort of social network may be uncovered for other social species besides humans, netdoms are found only among humans. One finds pecking orders and control struggles for wolves or monkeys for example [e.g. Wilson 1979; Wynne-Edwards 1985]. These involve communication, but at a simple level that need not rise above the pheromone level of an ant society [Wilson 1970]. This suggests that meaning and stories are what set human social action apart. Without stories, social action would have a monotone quality; there would not be all the “colors” that humans observe and use in social settings. And imbibing a formal story or film is so similar to imbibing “real life” that their authors and directors also, like gossipers in ordinary life, must have found effective shorthands for expressing identities and control in social relationships.

Stories are the accumulation of switchings across netdoms with a beginning, middle, and end [Tilly 2002] and constitute the texture of living culture.

Culture as Institutional Process

Speaking of meaning, where is culture in all this? High and popular cultures [e.g. Gans 1974] in the sense of museums, libraries, and soap operas are not central in this discussion, even if they can provide suitable examples for discussion. The focus is living culture, of which high and popular cultures are subsets; living culture is a process recognized in societal institutions and practices as by-products, but also co-constitutors, of social process at all levels.

Going to an appointment is an *institution*, sustained by a *rhetoric* of promptness. In social science usage, there are several connotations for the term *institution*: the broad architecture of functional areas (e.g., education, the arts, health, business as

institutions); a special kind of organization infused by values [Selznick 1952; 1955]; any social routine of behavior, such as a handshake; and so on. None of these alternatives is hostile to the usage of the concept in this article. Institutions and rhetorics are akin to networks and stories, in that spaces of possibilities for the ordinary in life, of what will be taken for granted, derive from each pair. Rhetorics make institutions explicit just as stories make networks relations explicit. An *institutional system* shepherds social processes by channeling them, by configuring institutions through rhetorics in a way that proves self-sustaining. Within each system, stories become mutually shared accounts when they muster through publics into rhetorics and, simultaneously, rhetorics play out into stories.

Culture emerges from all sorts of stories, from the simplest line heard on the playground, through unexpected adverse situations in contemporary urban settings. Stories are invoked, without hesitation, endlessly. Culture is institutionalized as context through the interplay of stories. Culture is constituted by “webs of significance” [Geertz 1973, 5] spun by identities. But this web of significances is also a web of relations, not “wayward” to formalization and experimentation.

Left to play by themselves indoors, young children often take on roles – mommy, doctor, nurse, cowboy, or teacher. Developmental psychology attests to and elaborates this common knowledge. And sociolinguist Keith Sawyer [1992] has specified the discourse pragmatics that he observed over a year of observation. One can conclude that from an early age, kids are made aware of more complex forms and higher levels of social process, over which they try to acquire some mastery. Their play is the beginning of the sophistication in transposition that everyone needs just to participate as a “normal” adult. Sophistication, however, is not the same as analytic awareness – such constant awareness indeed would induce stumbling instead of normality.

Accidents offer a different prism. Unlike children’s play, they are not pretend switchings. In a city, an accident often evokes an emergency team and ambulance. The injured person experiences a sudden switch from netdom to netdom and then a continuing succession of switches. Whether in Paris or New York, though, the situation will unfold according to much the same script from culture, inducing interlocking role behavior along networks.

In sum, story-making provides identities with interpretive contexts sustained by institutions and rhetorics. These contexts are fuelled by the “sparks” of netdom switchings, meanings. A particular set of stories comes to be associated with a network we trace through netdom switchings in a range of domains. For example, consider the duet of excuses between husband and wife across late work and tardiness in meeting up with each other.

Stories in Sets

A relationship gets interpreted in stories both by its participants and by observers. How does this process come about? Identities perceive and invoke the likelihood of impacts from other identities, which are seen to do the same. These relations get coded from raw reports into various shorthands of discourse and deportment. Then sets of signals, communications on topics, get transposed from one situation to another. Eventually these sets can settle down into stories or other conventions.

Rules of thumb, which often appear in packages [Simon 1945], are one form of conventions for a network. Rules of thumb are widely transposable across concrete social contexts and across frames of interpretation. Rules of thumb applied *here* affect the application of rules of thumb *there*, or their application here at other times. They are transmitted and vouched for along strings of interconnection in a network. A language makes them available in idioms and formulae. Rules of thumb can supply the story set for a network.

Everyday life, which is full of contradictions, has trained us and supplies us with convenient *sets of stories*. At any given time, we have learned to apply just one of the sets, and suppress memories of the switchings and changes that at other times we use and embroider to get along. Much of social science has been an auxiliary to this provision of sets of stories sufficient to account for almost anything we find – but only by suitable *ex post* selection of one rather than another story.

Stories can and do conceal projects of control: they can work as ideologies, but only via the actual process of explaining away things, if they happen, so that power need not be exerted. Failures too require accompanying stories. Every identity continually seeks control to maintain itself, and in that struggle breaks, as well as establishes, relations with other such identities. Both the tensions and their overcoming induce stories and may require sets of stories to characterize relations within a network.

Social networks are rooted in the reflexive nature of language in talk and as enhanced by the three *g*'s of semiotics: glance, gesture, and grunt. From this base can grow sophisticated realizations of solidarity, from what Doreian and Fararo [1998] formulate as “ideational” and “relational” aspects.

Moreover, the cast of characters should be expanded to include objects. Relations of various youths to a snappy roadster are indispensable to capturing the network dynamics in the movie *Saturday Night Fever*. So were the relations of the hero in the same movie (played by John Travolta) to a routine job and to the tailoring of his new suit. French sociologists have developed the insight about objects in a call for recasting theory of social networks [e.g. Latour 1987].

Yet it may be that a whole set of sets of stories proves necessary to sustain the metabolism of a single general network, such as of acquaintance. Participants may induce and call on a broad array of excuses and disclaimers and allowances that legitimate and keep viable a network of acquaintanceship.

We can understand how it is that stories have become universal, how they communicate effectively across diverse hearers and audiences – including social science. Charles Tilly writes:

Effective explanations require the peculiar combination of skepticism about the stories told with close attention to how stories work (...) Most of social life consists of interpersonal transactions whose consequences the participants can neither foresee nor control. Yet, after the fact, participants in complex social transactions seal them with stories (...) Identities are social arrangements reinforced by socially constructed and continuously renegotiated stories (...) we can *contextualize* stories, which means placing crucial stories in their nonstory contexts and seeing what social work they do [Tilly 2002, x-xiv].

And from further on:

Consider the place of standard stories in social construction. For reasons that lie deep in childhood learning, cultural immersion, or perhaps even the structure of human brains, people usually recount, analyze, judge, remember and reorganize social experiences as *standard stories* in which a small number of self-motivated entities interact within a constricted, contiguous time and space (...) Even if the individuals involved harbor other ideas, the embedding of stories in social networks seriously constrains interactions, hence collective actions of which people in those networks are capable (...) They recast events after the fact in standard story form [*ibidem*, 8-9]

Given multiple stories available for ex post explanation accountings are accepted whether or not the series of events would seem explicable to an outside observer. But this is possible only because story-lines organize the perceptions.

Story-Lines Frame Social Time

Any particular story by itself would quickly get so far out of step with the ongoing situation as to be unusable. *Story-lines* are explanation spread over time in time-frames. And story-lines come at least in a pair as they offer alternative accounts for change and constitute the fabric of social time. This is an accounting that does not itself lead to further shake-up of the events and actors already generated out of preceding mismatches. The pair (or more) that make up a story-line in some given context cover all possible outcomes, thus expressing the logic of the narrative genre in literature [Scholes and Kellogg 1966].

The time-frames are social times, which are constructed out of the application of story-lines. Hence, these times are multiple and not necessarily consistent. Social time interweaves *ex ante* and *ex post* in ways that may not be available to the awareness of many or any of the conscious persons or other personal actors continually being regenerated in ongoing social patterns. Social time consists as much in switchbacks and other nonlinearities as it does in any linear sequence. Story-lines accommodate these irregularities of social time [Ricoeur 1988]. Story-lines can also be seen as rational expectations, in the modern phrase [Muth 1959; Hechter 1987], but only in a limited sense. Social time is as much a by-product as a shaper of social pattern, just as social space is a self-consistent field. Therefore, social times are by-products of story-lines. But physical aspects of the realities of work also contribute to shape time and to shape population.

A number of contending identities use story-lines which survive in a matrix of contending control projects. There must be some correspondence between stories and the facts in physical space, and also the facts as may be seen by an observer in social space, but stories depend on each other as much as they depend on any other facts. So story-lines end up as a set from which is picked a parsimonious account that is consistent with control projects being pushed. Whatever comes to pass, and thus whatever process can be conceived, must be describable after the fact in terms of the story-lines.

The accounting of process and events is constrained by story-lines. Ambiguity is, then, the slippage between examples that have been articulated into a given story-line. This means that there are multiple descriptions available as plausible descriptions of process. Stories are paths both to the frames for, and to the by-products of, multiple levels of control. Each by-product is itself a resultant trace from interspersed movements of decoupling, playing off embeddings. Story-lines are devices accounting for this confusion, before and after the fact; they do so as decouplers. Then there can be further slippage between articulations by different story-sets, when two or more are invoked as elements in a larger codification, a framing.

Story-lines intertwine structuralist with individualist viewpoints; they do so as decouplers. Randall Collins's [1987] concept of ritual interaction chains appears to be similar to story-lines. So too does Goffman's [1974] frame concept. The story-lines approach also seems analogous to an approach taken on a much broader scale by Berman [1983]: for him, realities are dealt with in terms of parallel discourses of statute law, natural law, the common law, local customary law, merchant law, Roman law, equity, and so on.

Identities come from mismatches in contingencies and so perceive and try to control turbulence. An identity must have multiple possibilities from a story-line

available so as to be able, *ex post*, to give accounts of whatever in fact is happening concretely. The constituent stories from a story-line must be shared.

Positions and Plots

A story-line is analogous to a path in a network; it is in a way an expansion of the path in words. Each *position* generates at least one recurring path in a story-line as part of its continuing reproduction across distinct identities. Sets of stories become partitioned into story-lines able to accommodate whatever occurs with that position, in the reality of a stochastic, fluid context.

Indexing of one role by other coincident roles is what yields position. In a given Greek city-state, for example, the citizen may be a member of the assembly, who is head of a family, who is a soldier. There, citizen may be a resident of the locality who participates in an economy. Decoupling is presupposed and must be enacted to make possible this identification of several identities as one position with several roles in distinct network populations. Story-lines build up out of such constrained stories.

Location of a particular identity requires tracing how that identity came to embed in and be interlocked where it is. Position, therefore, gets elaborated into a historical statement. Position correlates with story-line, but requires several story-lines because of the reality of fluid, stochastic context.

A *plot* decouples events in one role frame from events in other frames. Dually, events serve to decouple plots. Story-lines are the material for plots. Plots deal in stock characters and scenes so that they can be transposed from one story-line to another. The combination of stock elements into a plot gives it an inner side that can furnish accoutrements for melding identities into further level as career.

To see persons, or organizations, chatting back and forth in everyday life is to see one primitive sort of plotting in operation. This is the framing of picaresque stories, stories about the concrete particulars of happenstance in a population, such that all actors stay within a stereotyped format. This is also stereotyped content, which would be for us, in today's society, variously dealing with sports or children or discs as actors in the skits.

One speaks of a plot when certain occasions always trigger one story-line from some given set of story-lines. Plot is built from a given set of story-lines. Plot accommodates positions, and yet plot can be transposed across a larger fluid context.

For example, movie-goers know the conventions in cowboy movies, constituting a major part of an "art world" in the sense of Becker [1982]. The conventions work by relying on stereotyped positions for actors, call them positions or niches:

greedy rancher, corrupt sheriff, heroic knight-errant, beleaguered family, and the like. And in a production market, complementary stories are used about niches for price leaders and the like, which also constitute a convention.

Stories can be understood by identities who are not themselves active in the convention and are also consumed by them. When mobilized, meanings, stories, or rhetorics form narratives that enable identities to “get action.”

Rhetorics and Narratives

Like identities, stories and rhetorics can be mobilized to achieve some goal [White, Godart and Corona 2007]. Sets of stories highlight the universality of stories and enable the deployment of strategies. *Narratives* are used in the process of mobilization, as a tool to convince allies and thwart adverse control attempts. However, even the most strategized narratives depend – for their failure or success – on social time framed by story-lines and plots.

Rhetoric for person invokes the biographical sense of identity. This is identity as career, and it is this concept of person as career that channels switchings and thereby also creates person as style. “Practices” intervene in these dynamics.

Practices are usually implicit and capture how humans individually relate to their bodies and biophysical environment. They are also social habits, similar to Bourdieu’s *habitus*, not captured in explicit institution. Observers, whether within the given system or not, have their own practices: they develop pragmatics to construe meaning and action.

Whether an institution is explicit or implicit, practices are the vehicles for enacting and reproducing it. Take an example. The monarch as an institution depends on practices that have become so routinized that they are protocols: bows and other ways of addressing the monarch. Rhetorics such as those associated with etiquette provide guidance for participation in institutions that also helps to build them through persistent switchings. Rules of circulation during promenades at the Versailles court of the French monarchy are an example.

Culture as an institutional process is enacted by practices and sustained by rhetorics. Social science is no exception; research practices enact and reproduce professional rhetorics. Narratives of scientific revolutions sustain change. Social sciences are impregnated with existing culture.

Discussion: Culture as Basis for Social Science and Getting Action

The approach developed in this article takes netdom – a first order mixture of structure and culture, which are second order constructs – as a starting point. Social formations and forms of discourse made up of stories are derived from the dynamics of identity seeking control in and across netdoms. Switching is key because it is the mechanism that creates the “sparks” of interpretive contexts-meanings. We also engage the view of culture and structure as two interdependent yet autonomous systems, summarized by Sharon Hays in a trenchant account:

I argue that social structure consists of *two* central, interconnected elements: systems of social relations and systems of meaning (...) While not reducible to systems of social relations, culture matches the other central structure of social life in its power, its patterning, its durability, and its collective and transcendent nature. If one wants to understand the resilient patterns that shape the behavior of any individual or group of individuals, *both* the cultural and the relational milieu must be taken into account [Hays 1994].

The separation of structure and culture is akin to the “purification” process described by Bruno Latour [1993]. If the two categories exist because they shape interpretive contexts, and in this way belong to culture, the lived experience of identities is made of netdoms. In the snakeskin-shedding view of culture, social formation must at any given time have a carapace, which, however, is outgrown and drops off as a new one comes into place. Museums and libraries collect and shelter the snakeskins. But surely a culture should be seen as a continuously interacting population of forms of discourse made up of stories articulated within some social formation.

In Swidler’s [1986] terms, culture is made up of practices that generate stories. One can view culture as an array of forms of discourse that set the interpretive contexts for all social actions so that it can be computed as an envelope from them, as well as shaped by them. Effective practices to that end have evolved that precede, preface, and anticipate social sciences.

Kinship was the first social science. All the paradoxes and difficulties are there, in various peoples’ own native constructions of their kinship edifices, constructions in formats that mix observation with analysis and with proclamation [Spencer and Gillen 1927]. Only a few of these formats have proved able to sustain and reproduce themselves. This first science was lost for a while. Its phenomena are too close and too involving to encourage recognition of abstract similarities in cultural content. It may well be the only preexisting and discoverable social science.

Social scientists may see challenges to their authority from ordinary persons, but only with respect to the phenomenology of everyday life, which most social scientists

would concede to them anyway. Yet, even this can confound and obfuscate research. “Networks” are the outstanding example today. Ambitious MBAs, movie stars, consultants, social workers, journalists – they all agree on the importance of networks, and the plethora of social networking websites sustains the fad. Since sources that diverse all urge the advantages of “networking” as social process, the term must confound many interpretations, and thus it confounds much social science fieldwork attempting to use network terms and concepts.

But, one may object, these laypersons use common sense, so their joint endeavors surely cannot confound codified scientific results regarding more recondite aspects of social organization. Since the laypersons are no status threat, surely they cannot be besting scientists! However, the “laity” includes the jurists or the bankers, all sorts of groups and persons preeminent over social scientists within existing social stratification. And sometimes, perhaps, the preeminence exists because their professions’ and professional insights are superior, especially for the aspects in which they specialize, whether or not a parallel specialty science, a political science or an economics, is split off. Whatever the outcome of any such particular argument, the very discussion concedes the basic point, since the discussion is, literally, in lay terms. Getting action from social science or otherwise has culture for basis.

Actual social orders and cultures are much messier and more interesting than are particular rhetorics, or embeddings of rhetorics into Utopian schematics. But even Utopian schematics do capture aspects of how actors try to perceive their social context, and these schematics do so across a wide range of historical contexts. Berman [1983] has argued an extreme form of this view, in his sweeping canvas of the evolution of legal systems for the whole Western world since the emergence of the papacy. The point is that continual reshaping of meanings to maintain the semblance of coherence in social action requires explicit and reliable interconnections between the framing of sets of stories and the structure of institutions. It is these mappings that make rhetoric possible.

Conscious and proclaimed cultures are sets of rhetorics that encapsulate attempts, often inept, at regularizing social spaces from the perspective of different populations and institutions. Hegemony [Williams 1977; Keohane 1984] reflects the success of a family of such attempts that exhibits some coordination and expertise in an autochthonous theory. The stochastic mode of perception, analysis, and reality is omnipresent just because of the feebleness of culture’s hold on the patchy social realities that erect and re-erect themselves upon continuing biosocial realities. Hegemony nonetheless testifies to the importance of some order being imposed: the transposable order that is supplied by basic sets of story-lines that can account for whatever happens. Social science theories are recent attempts at hegemony.

The task of social science is to construe boundaries and environments. All analytical sciences work from boundaries: boundary conditions are preeminent. Social analysis is peculiar only in that it must seek out the generation of its own spaces as part of the environment. Since the spaces are plural – and irregular, temporary, and ill-connected to boot – the boundaries are difficult to find, subtler than in other sciences.

Any changes must originate from countering the inertia endemic in social organization, that is, change comes from fresh action curing blockage. Action is fresh when it overcomes the inherent lethargy of social life; intervention happens in rhetorics which tend to block fresh action. Rhetorics elaborate and sustain meanings through reenactments. Getting action thus has to take account of meanings, and to rely upon them; but the principal task is to stay ahead of and strip away meaning. Hence, getting action becomes a higher-order project.

Conclusion

Networks and domains are construed from netdoms which constitute the texture of our lived experience. Identities seeking control generate meanings through their switchings among netdoms. Meanings – verbal or not – coagulate and form stories, which in turn constitute sets of stories made available for further control efforts and ensuring the universality of narratives as mobilization for action.

Story-lines and plots organize the social time that guides identities in their control efforts. Institutions and rhetorics crystallize culture for all sorts of publics. Culture is made of these forms of discourse and of the practices that yield them. This is the basis for social science and the generation of fresh action.

This paper compiles and expands ideas developed from Identity and Control [White 1992; forthcoming], and more specifically from this newer version, to appear in May 2008 from Princeton University Press and also as translated into French by Michel Grossetti and Frédéric Godart. We thank Corinne Kirchner, Marco Santoro, and Matthias Thiemann for their insightful comments and suggestions.

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Stories from Identity and Control

Abstract: Identities arise as they mitigate uncertainty through control efforts aimed at other identities; meanings – verbal or not – surface in intermittent switchings of identities among socio-cultural phases known as netdoms (network-domains). Stories are accretions of meanings and form the texture of culture as interpretive context. Further compounds of stories – or forms of discourse – can be mobilized for action (narratives) or frame social time (story-lines and plots). All these forms of discourse support a view of culture as practice and as a basis for social science. While the sociological conundrum of structure and culture is usually solved by proclaiming that these two dimensions of social life are dual and co-constitutive – interdependent yet autonomous – this paper suggests another approach that takes the dynamic of identity and control as a starting point and helps resolve the so-called micro-macro gap.

Keywords: control, culture, discourse, identity, narratives, netdom, stories, structure, switching.

Harrison C. White holds a Ph.D. in Theoretical Physics from the MIT and a Ph.D. in Sociology from Princeton University and is the Giddings Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, in New York. He is well known for his work on social network analysis and the structure of production markets (*Markets from Networks*, Princeton University Press, 2002). He is just finishing a massive rewrite and extension of his 1992 book, *Identity and Control*. It is to be translated by Michel Grossetti and Frédéric Godart into French.

Frédéric C. Godart is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Columbia University. A former fellow of the École Normale Supérieure de Cachan in France, he holds an M.Phil. in social and political sciences from the University of Cambridge as well as an M.S. in management from Sciences Po in Paris. He is interested in the structure and dynamics of creative markets, the development of design as a significant economic activity, and the sociology of meaning. For three years he was a Research and Business Analyst for McKinsey & Company's Strategy Practice.