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Hegemonic stories in environmental advocacy testimonials

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ABSTRACT

Several environmental advocacy organizations have emerged that use narrative persuasion techniques to change climate change opinions and overcome climate change inaction. Written from the perspective of parents and grandparents (particularly mothers), the narratives in these testimonials use socio-cultural values and relatable images to motivate environmental concern. This article identifies pernicious hegemonic themes in the testimonial stories that have been featured on the websites of environmental advocacy organizations and critically analyzes these narratives using feminist and queer theoretical frameworks. Two themes are highlighted for analysis: first, themes about the special knowledges, powers, emotions, and duties of motherhood; and second, themes about the importance of preserving the environment for children and their offspring in the future. The oppressive influence of these particular narratives has been argued at length in previous research. Efforts to mitigate climate change are important, but attempts to shape public opinion should not simultaneously reproduce harmful myths about women and motherhood.

1. Introduction

A minority of Americans report worrying about climate change “a great deal” [1]. People tend to have a preference for present consumption and have trouble conceptualizing events in the future [2], and this may be particularly true for an abstract phenomenon like climate change whose impacts, for many in the Global North, are yet to come. Climate change opinions and environmental concern in the United States appear to be largely a matter of tribal knowledge, with opinions increasingly divided along partisan lines [3,4]. Brulle and coauthors [5] find that access to scientific information has a minimal effect on public climate change opinions, and Leiserowitz [6] finds that climate change opinions are formed on the basis of experiential, psychological, and socio-cultural influences rather than analytical ones.

These findings from public opinion research are supported by social psychology and marketing studies on the efficacy of narrative persuasion techniques for overcoming psychological resistance—the motivation to avoid a change in attitude or behavior when presented with new information [7–9]. Public opinion research also suggests the usefulness of narratives for mobilizing participants in social movements [10]. Recent research indicates that these methods are particularly effective when the subject identifies with the narrator [11].

A growing number of environmental advocacy organizations have emerged that use narrative persuasion techniques. Organizations like Mothers Out Front, Mothers for Nuclear, Grands-parents pour le Climat, and DearTomorrow use testimonial stories to overcome inaction and

resistance in their intended audiences. Targeting parents and grandparents, particularly mothers, the narratives in these testimonials use socio-cultural values and relatable images to motivate concern for environmental issues. The synthesis of existing research on both climate change opinions and persuasion methods indicates that narratives may be an effective tactic to increase the proportion of people who see climate change as a very serious problem that merits addressing.

However, narratives are not neutral and in fact often reproduce existing power relations. Powerful groups preserve the institutions that maintain their power by obtaining the consent of less powerful groups through a process known as hegemony. This consent is obtained not by force but through subtle yet pernicious narratives woven into the cultural material of everyday life that justify and reinforce distributions of power [12, p. 11–16]. This article identifies pernicious hegemonic narratives in the testimonial stories featured on the websites of environmental advocacy organizations, and critically analyzes these narratives using feminist and queer theoretical frameworks. Two themes are highlighted for analysis: first, themes about the special knowledges, powers, emotions, and duties of motherhood; and second, themes about the importance of preserving the environment for children and their offspring in the future. The oppressive influence of these particular narratives has been argued at length in feminist and queer research [13–18].

Recent studies question the efficacy of narrative persuasion techniques in environmental advocacy campaigns [19–21]. At the same time, MIT recently awarded DearTomorrow top honors in its climate

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change Shifting Behavior contest [22], possibly encouraging more environmental advocacy organizations to adopt a narrative persuasion approach. Efforts to mitigate climate change are important, but attempts to shape public opinion away from indifferent or even hostile stances should not simultaneously reproduce harmful myths about women and motherhood that restrict life opportunities by portraying motherhood as the best or only acceptable outcome for women. This is particularly true when the narrative persuasion technique itself may be unproductive in an environmental context.

2. Materials and methods

An international sample of environmental advocacy organizations targeting parents and grandparents, some with web-based testimonials, were identified using an internet search. Testimonials from United States-based DearTomorrow [23] (24 testimonials) and Mothers for Nuclear [24] (11 testimonials), and the Swiss chapter of Grands-parents Pour Le Climat [25] (5 testimonials) were included, as were mission statements and other web content from Climate Parents [26], Mothers Out Front [27], and Climate Mamas [28] in the United States and the chapter of Grands-parents Pour Le Climat [29] in Belgium. Organizations were limited to those with web content written in English and French, the languages spoken by the author. Mission statements and testimonials were downloaded and archived for analysis. All available web-published testimonials as of September 2016 were included for every organization except DearTomorrow, for which 24 sequential testimonials published between May and September of 2016 were included. Atlas.ti, a qualitative research software, was used to code the material to examine the testimonials and mission statements for themes in their content, structure, and language. The research objective was not to obtain a scientific sample for quantitative analysis and hypothesis testing, but rather to conduct a qualitative thematic analysis of published testimonials, examining the written content for the presence of hegemonic narratives related to women, children, and motherhood. Two distinct but related theoretical frameworks were used to analyze these organizations' mission statements and the narratives in their online testimonials: feminist theories of motherhood and a queer theory of children in political discourse.

While many theories of children and motherhood exist (for a survey, see Arendell [15,30]), feminist theories of motherhood, in particular the theories of Rich, Chodorow, and Benjamin [13,14,31] provide a useful framework for critically analyzing environmental advocacy testimonials aimed at mothers. These theories argue that motherhood is a double-edged sword, at once responsible for both the idealization and devaluation of women. These theories argue that the idealization of motherhood and mothers by both feminists and anti-feminists is as damaging as the denigration of women and motherhood. They reject the notions that women are by nature more nurturing and intuitive or that women possess a natural inclination towards care, and contend that motherhood in patriarchy demands instinct and self-denial rather than intelligence and self-fulfillment [14,p. 42]. Gimenez [32] develops a critique of the ideology of compulsory motherhood that underlies implicitly pro-natalist feminist politics and the women's liberation movement. Benjamin [31,p. 200] and Roach [15,p. 43–44] discuss the use of mothers and the family in political discourse on both the right and the left, in which mothers are able to symbolically clean up the messes created by powerful men in the public sphere by devoting themselves to mothering and the "endangered" domestic sphere. Related to these theories is the ecofeminist critique of the association between women and nature [16,17], which makes the argument that Mother Nature-type narratives are embedded in and produced by a system that subordinates women and devalues nature, thus this linking women to nature provides further justification for the joint devaluation of both.

A queer theory of the use of children in political discourse is articulated by Edelman [18], who argues that the use of symbolic

idealized children by both the right and the left serves a hegemonic purpose of constraining acceptable action and compelling an attitude of "reproductive futurism." Rich describes this same strategy in her critique of maternal pacifist activism, writing that, "A child can be used as a symbolic credential, a sentimental object, a badge of self-righteousness," [14,p. xxiv]. According to Edelman, The Child is used as a "disciplinary image of the Imaginary past or as site of a projective identification with an always impossible future" [18,p. 31] that limits the freedom of adults and supports compulsory heterosexuality, promoting sexual reproduction as normal and virtuous. Edelman argues that narratives about children and their protection are harmful to queer and deliberately childless adults—not caring about children is seen as deeply anti-social, if not downright evil. An extension to Edelman's arguments using feminist theories of motherhood is that narratives mandating the protection of idealized symbolic children are harmful to all women. Women are socially assigned the task of caring for children, so logically, this job of protecting children falls on them.

These feminist and queer theoretical approaches share a claim that the same myths and narratives about mothers and children are employed by both the right and the left, feminists and anti-feminists, and that these narratives establish norms that constrain the life opportunities of adults, particularly women. It is worth noting that these theories reflect white, middle-class, and Western narratives about children and motherhood and their particular functions in political discourses. However, not all children and mothers are idealized in this same manner.

Ewick and Sibley [33] argue that narratives are not impartial windows into the social world of story-tellers, but instead represent "cultural productions." Stories are told with particular goals in mind, are constrained by social norms and reflect "dominant cultural meanings," [33,p. 211–213]. The frequent repetition of similar themes and stories in narratives contributes to their hegemonic power. In part, the ability of hegemonic narratives to reinforce divisions of power is related to the telling of stories by and about individuals, concealing the role of social structures while implicitly reproducing them. Stories within and about families, in particular, "both generate and reproduce 'the family' by legitimating meanings and power relations that privilege... parents over children, males over females, and the white, middle-class family over alternative family structures," [34,p. 50].

Davis [35,p. 3–29] and Collins [36] discuss the role of the legacy of slavery in shaping the meaning of motherhood for black women in America, a narrative Lorde [37,p. 16] describes as, "buried in myths of little worth." Anti-natalist hegemonic images of black women and children have been employed in political discourse to promote and justify the dismantling of social welfare programs and to restrict the sexual reproduction of African American women [38]. Bulbek [39,p. 97–117] provides a review of theories of motherhood in the Global South, where configurations of mothering may bear little resemblance to the institution of motherhood in contemporary Western capitalism described by Rich, Chodorow, and Benjamin. Disciplinary images of women and children during famines in the Horn of Africa have been broadcast to U.S. audiences and used to justify the implementation of anti-natalist "population control" policies to restrict the sexual reproduction of African women [40]. Many contemporary climate change accounts, for example, the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, also invoke images of women and children in poverty in the Global South to justify interventions to curb the fertility of women of color in order to save the environment [41]. While middle-class white women in the Global North are frequently depicted as virtuous, linked with nature, and bearing children who warrant protection, women of color and their children are depicted as linked with moral decline and environmental destruction [42].

3. Results

Inspecting the testimonials, several themes emerged. The

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