A Hermeneutic Approach to Explaining and Understanding Public Controversies

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ABSTRACT

Notwithstanding the growing use of interpretive analysis in public administration and policy research, its fullest potential for evaluating intractable public conflict has yet to be tapped. We develop a mode of narrative analysis, partly based upon Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics, that shows promise for analyzing public disputes. We illustrate this with a case study in Los Angeles involving a contentious proposal to inject recycled wastewater into the city's water supply. The analysis reveals that, by representing opposing interests with a simplistic narrative, the water industry's response has been superfluous. The latter assumes that impasse simply results from the public's lack of information, the logical response being an information dissemination campaign. We employ a hermeneutic approach to reveal a set of persistent issues that project proponents have hitherto failed to address. By respecting the inherent plurivocity and intertextuality of narrative, hermeneutics provides new inroads into controversial public issues. We close the discussion with implications for practice.

INTRODUCTION

We begin by echoing the judgments of others before us, that interpretive approaches have a primary place in the study of public administration and policy. We add to this literature by describing the special role that narrative analysis can play in understanding public controversies. One important goal of the policy analyst is to deeply understand the public's perceptions and experiences of a policy situation. People make sense of their myriad experiences and circumstances by crafting coherent narratives (Bruner 1990; Fisher 1994). As Ricoeur writes, "By means of the [narrative's] plot, goals, causes, and chance are brought together within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action" (Ricoeur 1984, ix). So it is, then, that by reconstructing people's narrative accounts, we can best reproduce their experiences of a situation. To do this, we will employ Ricoeur's hermeneutic perspective on narrative (Ricoeur 1976, 1991).

The central aim of the article is to elaborate on how hermeneutics provides new methodological directions for policy analysis. Employing a hermeneutic approach, we

discuss how we analyze textual evidence (i.e., interviews, archival information, and others) and derive narrative interpretations that, potentially, better reflect the multiple and complex meanings particular to a policy situation. Hermeneutics, by exploring the fundamental plurivocity of narrative, can illuminate issues that might not be found in media accounts or anywhere else in any coherent form.

We will illustrate this with the case study of the Los Angeles (LA) potable reuse project. In 2000, the LA Department of Water and Power (DWP) announced completion of an ambitious effort to recycle treated wastewater and pump the same down to drinking water aquifers in the San Fernando Valley. Officially known as the East Valley Water Reclamation Project (EVWRP), the project was approved in 1995, but it was only later, when the DWP announced the start of its operation in 2000, that it gained media attention. The political tumult that ensued, from local politicians, homeowners' associations and others was completely unexpected, and it eventually led to scrapping the already-finished project. The power of the movement to overturn the project shook up the water profession, and to this day, the LA case is used by the water industry as a cautionary tale.

The case study is an exemplar because it vividly illustrates the danger of relying solely on a single, simplistic interpretation—for example, public managers responding in nonsubstantive ways that do not address underlying public concerns. In the LA case, the industry's response was to call for better public relations campaigns, without any thought to amending the project or process to resolve the fundamental roots of public anxiety over it. Specifically, the hermeneutic treatment provides additional narrative interpretations of the issue that media accounts did not acknowledge, allows a better understanding of the nature and strength of public opposition, and suggests unresolved issues that public deliberation might take up.

Interest in narrative grew with the interpretive turn in the social sciences (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Rabinow and Sullivan 1979, 1987). Policy scholars took issue with the deductive approach of technical knowledge, with its fixation on objective measures and universal principles, and instead argued how issues and policies were socially constructed and highly contextual (Dryzek 1982; Fischer and Forester 1993). The primacy of technical knowledge was questioned and, increasingly, narrative knowledge seen as equally valid (Jameson 1984; Lyotard 1979).

Over the past several decades, scholars have called attention to the methodological value of narrative analysis to public administration and policy research (Balfour and Mesaros 1994; Feldman et al. 2004; Fischer 2003; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Hampton 2009; Lejano and Wessells 2006; Ospina and Dodge 2005; Roe 1989, 1994; Schram and Neisser 1997; Sköldberg 1994; Yanow 1992, 2007). This is joined by an already considerable literature on narrative approaches to studying organizational process and design (e.g., see Boje 1991; Boyce 1996; Czarniawska-Joerges 1998; Martin 1982; Patriotta 2003; Weick 1995). In this article, we focus on narrative not so much for its use in describing the organizational but in understanding the nature of public disputes and offering avenues for their resolution.

Among the first to use narrative analysis to study public controversies was Emery Roe (1989, 1994), who studied policy narratives in order to understand the multiple and complex meanings of policy situations. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum demonstrates how complex normative positions are best expressed in narrative form (Nussbaum 1990). Deborah Stone (1997) describes "causal stories," which public managers and politicians craft, to construct reality in a way that best captures their interests and policy goals.

In this discussion, we understand a narrative to simply mean a story, composed of a coherent sequence of events, involving a set of characters, which are actors with definite traits (e.g., see Bal 2009; Ryan 2007). When we reconstruct a narrative underlying an issue, we are simply composing a story, with events and characters, as if a narrator were recounting it to us directly. It is possible that no one source, whether a respondent or a text, ever gives us a complete narrative *in toto* or that the source provides only one particular account of a larger narrative, and it is the analyst's role to assemble the different aspects of the issue in a coherent way. The resulting, reconstructed narrative is akin to the *fabula* of a literary piece—that is, it presents the plot even when it cannot be found in any single narrator's particular account (Bal 2009).

How can we tell better, from worse, narrative interpretations of an issue? We draw from two theoretical frames: first, a legal hermeneutic approach and, second, a more pragmatic, policy-oriented one. The first approach, as found in Bennett and Feldman (1982), argues that credibility of a story lies in its coherence or lack of ambiguity. Structural ambiguity arises when there is no obvious rule that allows the listener to connect different story elements or to choose between contending interpretations. Another criterion involves richness of account or its ability to explain or encompass the many complex elements of a situation (Kaplan 1986). Does the story help us better understand the motivations of the different actors, reasons for their vigorous opposition, and the failure of the agency's attempts to quell such opposition? When there is more than one account of a story that can be empirically verified—that is to say, there is more than one "true account"—then the richer account has the upper hand. Lastly, the pragmatism test lies in the consistency of the account with empirical evidence (Ball 1995).

Why is there a need to find meanings beneath (or beyond) the surface of what people say or write? One reason: there may be processes or conditions, like ocean currents beneath a surface calm, that influence the proceedings in unseen ways. Tradition, power, culture, and other forces of structuration act like this. Furthermore, there may be issues that stakeholders, consciously or subconsciously, relegate to the background. Yanow notes that in public decision making, some issues are *verboten*—that is, "publicly unspeakable because there is no explicit public consensus underlying them" (Yanow 1992, 400). This is also tied up with political necessities such as maintaining "public silences about contradictions" (418).

In trying to deepen one's understanding of a situation, the obvious recourse is to talk to people in the situation. Why, then, would we need a hermeneutic approach, one designed upon the interpretive analysis of text? Why would we need an interpretive approach at all and not simply treat what people say as objective and material evidence? First, we do treat what people say as material evidence (though the word, "objective," is inappropriate), and second, this too is text (Ricoeur 1984). And texts, as with other vehicles of meaning, need interpretation.

Going by the face value of what someone says or writes, even when she is trying to be completely truthful, never fixes the complete meaning of the text because of the hidden, unrealized, and inexhaustible polysemy of text. Fischer explains: "Often the real problem to be dealt with in a public controversy is created by considerations outside the scope of everyday arguments. People may fail to see that their disagreements are lodged in the social systems or political beliefs that stand apart from more local considerations . . . the analyst

has to reach beyond the stories being told in a particular place and time and include other available narrative discourse'' (Fischer 2003, 174).

Hermeneutics is one path we can take to reconstruct narratives of public dissent surrounding a policy issue (as previously suggested in Lejano 2006). This supports the central claim of this article, which is that hermeneutics affords new approaches for policy analysts, public managers, and other actors to understand policy controversies in a richer way, to take into account more dimensions and perspectives, and to use this understanding to craft better managerial and institutional responses. First, this approach respects the plurivocity of narratives and draws out the differing meanings of an issue to different policy actors. This can have the additional effect of further legitimizing claims made by different stakeholders and demystifying their complex points of view. Second, the hermeneutic approach emphasizes intertextuality and allows the analyst a systematic way of employing other, distal sources to inform understanding of the primary text. The concepts of plurivocity, which refers to the possibility of multiple versions or meanings of a story, and intertextuality, which refers to the degree by which the meaning of a text is shaped by other texts, are particularly useful to the hermeneutic endeavor.

Though the word ''hermeneutics'' is often used synonymously with ''interpretation,'' we will use hermeneutics in its more particular sense, which is ''the study of understanding, especially the task of understanding texts'' (Palmer 1969). Although related to methods of studying text, such as content analysis or discourse analysis, hermeneutics refers most of all to the conceptual strategy employed, which is a dialectic between the sense of the text and the reference to the world outside the text—the so-called hermeneutic circle. Different methods for textual analysis can be employed within a hermeneutic framework, but it is this dialectic approach that is most central to it.

THE HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

Description

As Balfour and Mesaros discuss, the aim of hermeneutics is to achieve what Geertz so vividly described as ''thick description,'' the kind that, while never transforming the observer into a native, nevertheless guides her into knowing whether a passerby has just performed a blink or a wink (Balfour and Mesaros 1994; Geertz 1973).

But how do we peer into deeper meanings of public controversies? In this, we are guided by theories of hermeneutics, particularly that expounded by Paul Ricoeur (1976, 1981). Imagine a situation wherein multiple and varied actors are drawn together by an issue. The narrative of water recycling, for example, has drawn many different kinds of policy actors in support of it—scientists, water agencies, conservationists, etc. At times, these actors will sign some joint statement, which we might point to as a general, encompassing narrative that describes their coalition. But what if we were to try and understand meanings that lie behind the joint declaration? Do these documents mean simply what is written, or are there other meanings? Do these actors have ulterior motives? Are there differences among these actors that they are unconscious of or relegate to the background?

The problem is that this becomes a guessing game, in which the observer–analyst attempts to read into the minds of the authors of the document and intuit what their meaning is. But, again informed by Geertz, we can never become ''native'' to the situation and know exactly what the authors think and know. Second, it is quite possible that the different

signatories to the document all attribute different and varied meanings to the latter. No single author can speak to the whole of the meaning of the coalition. The document is then merely a vehicle for group solidarity but not a very good receptacle for the meaning of the group and the members' varying policy agendas (for an example of how such documents can act as boundary objects, see Goldstein 2010).

Ricoeur suggests that, despite all this, interpretation is possible and, in fact, necessitated by the distanciation (of writer to reader) created by writing. Interpretation, in his words, is moving ''from what the text says to what it talks about'' (Ricoeur 1976) or from ''sense'' to ''reference'' (Frege 1948), where sense refers to the directly ostensive meanings found in the immediate text, whereas reference refers to nonostensive meanings found outside the text.

Interpretation is made possible by several logical movements. The first has to do with understanding the operation that occurs when a discourse (in the minds and spoken words of policy actors) becomes fixed as text, written down, and transmitted to posterity (Ricoeur 1974). In this movement, the text takes on a semantic autonomy—that is, it is removed from the ownership of the author, and meaning becomes a product of work by the reader. In Barthes' terms, it becomes a ''writerly'' text (Barthes 1974) where the reader participates in the task of authorship. The text then becomes subject to a plurality of interpretations. This is necessary. It is this plurality that allows the signers of the declaration to converge on the same language even while bringing different predispositions to it. The power of the text comes from this surplus of meaning (Ricoeur 1976).

The essential operation is the hermeneutic ''circle,'' which is described as a dialectic back-and-forth between two related actions: *explanation* and *understanding* (Gadamer 1975; Ricoeur 1976, 1981). Explanation may be described as a horizontal operation, wherein the analyst remains within the text and attempts to bring out all the meaning, inflections, and significance found in it. In contrast, understanding is a vertical movement. Here, we move away from the immediate or primary text and interpret the larger context in which it is embedded. Context is oftentimes comprised by other texts removed from the immediate situation (e.g., epic stories about the nation's identity). It is for this reason that hermeneutics is often defined as the act of relating the part (the text) to the whole (the larger field, which is often a universe of other texts). Interpretation, then, is a dialectic between *sense*, when we appreciate a text in its semantic autonomy, and *reference*, when we further our understanding by relating the text to the world opened up by it.

This provides us with the premise for a methodological strategy. When analyzing the immediate text, the analyst can then find cues or references that take us away from the immediate and onto more distal, yet related, texts. This is in the spirit of Barthes' model, in which some parts of the text serve as indices, vertically oriented (or, to use Barthes' term, paradigmatic) elements that serve to integrate other, external dimensions to syntagmatic elements in the present text (Barthes and Duisit 1975). As defined by Saussure, syntagmatic relations refer to other signifiers found in the same text, whereas paradigmatic ones refer to those that exist outside the text at hand (Saussure 1916). As Barthes illustrates in his analysis of the story, Sarrasine, mention of, say, a clock on the Elyseé-Bourbone can refer outside the text to the Paris of the Bourbon Restoration, then a place of sudden and ill-gotten wealth (Barthes 1974). These indices or tags can point the reader to other texts. The method we illustrate in this article benefits from the fact that narratives have an inherent plurivocity and intertextuality (Kristeva 1980).

We will use the case study of water reuse in LA to illustrate the method. We will see how mere explanation, the horizontal operation that confines interpretation only to the immediate text, provides an initial interpretation. The initial narrative construction is what we will refer to as the primary interpretation or narrative, obtained from aggregate textual evidence that forms the immediate commentary on the policy issue. We then construct a hermeneutically derived narrative by adding dimensionality, through the superimposition of other texts in the vertical operation that Ricoeur and Gadamer referred to as understanding. These other texts derive from more distal sources—that is, those that do not pertain to the situation at hand (such as an article on LA politics that makes no mention of water). These "secondary" texts are located through tags (to other, distal themes) found in the primary text, as will be demonstrated.

In the case study, consideration of secondary texts moves us from the immediate confines of the DWP project in the year, 2000, to situations further back in the past. This literally captures Ricoeur's description of the hermeneutic as moving from the synchronic to the diachronic (Ricoeur 1981). This reflects the origins of this approach in classic hermeneutics, where deeper interpretation of an ancient text is allowed by considering other texts from the same historical context. Perhaps, this clarifies why it is that our approach is not simply about getting more information by considering more texts. Rather, it is bringing into the interpretation elements of context that ordinarily would not be considered, since these elements are not directly tied to the matter at hand.

METHODOLOGY

The primary or immediate text was obtained by gathering archival evidence, in the form of newspaper articles, about the DWP project. The main themes or elements of the primary narrative were obtained through thematic analysis of the aggregate primary text, following standard procedures for thematic analysis (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). This was aided by an initial content analysis, which we conducted to find keywords that might lead us to text about the issue.

The analysis was based on text aggregated from 54 pieces of content, 42 of which were newspaper articles, online and print. The remaining were magazines, technical bulletins, or newsletter publications. Most of the data consisted of stories printed just prior to the DWP's decision in 2000 to shut down the project due to public pressure. These news stories were obtained by searching in lexisnexus database for the search term "Tillman plant," "recycled water," and others. We added to these by searching the web and several news story outlets, to track down additional articles. The thematic analysis was aided by an initial reading of the entire cache of text, done by both researchers, and identification of themes and classification of text were done over several rounds. Basic themes that recurred in the aggregate text were identified in this repetitive process and frequencies of occurrence recorded. As in Feldman et al. (2004), thematic coding was an iterative, as well as inductive, process. The unit of analysis is essentially parcels of meaning, which in the text being studied can simply be a short phrase—any bit of text that conveys a distinct claim or idea about the project being studied. In many cases, this unit of meaning is found in one or several sentences, for example, "This is human waste," says a spokeswoman for a San Fernando Valley homeowner association (Getzlaff 2000), which we take as a unit of analysis and proceed to find other texts to which it refers, such as articles on the San Fernando Valley homeowner association.

We then did a partial analysis of the structure of the body of text. For this, we borrowed from Barthes' concept of codes that define and unfold the narrative (Barthes 1974), particularly the symbolic codes that develop antithetical elements in the text. We then prepared an initial narrative reconstruction based on primary text—that is, a fabula or basic storyline that is not any one particular actor's rendering of the story. In this and the preceding thematic analysis, we built in a form of verification by having the first researcher conduct an analysis and the second researcher independently doing the same and reconciling differences between the two. Except for one instance where the two attributed different themes to a text (a difference which was subsequently reconciled), the researchers' analyses were consistent.

This brings us to the question of agency and judgment on the part of the analyst. The hermeneutic method does not bind the analyst to simply pursuing all possible references to more distal issues—there are, in fact, too many directions to pursue. The analyst needs to employ criteria, as we discussed—that is, coherence, richness, and pragmatism, in judging which themes to explore. For example, a news article would make a reference to the community of Silver Lake as one of the recipients of the recycled water. But pursuing this thread would not deepen our understanding of the conflict, inasmuch as it introduces no new insights into factors that contribute to public opposition, thus adding nothing to the richness of the account. An analysis of salient issues surrounding Silver Lake, for example, its residents' historical opposition to Dodger Stadium, would not cohere with the rest of the recycled water narrative, since Silver Lake residents were not at all involved in opposition to EVWRP. And lastly, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that Silver Lake contributed anything in particular to the water issue but, rather, was perhaps simply mentioned casually as an example of the non-Valley users downstream. Furthermore, how and to what degree these criteria are brought to bear on the analysis requires the analyst to exercise much discretion. The final test in the hermeneutic process is when the analyst considers the whole, the entire reconstructed narrative with all the distally linked side issues, and judges if it has integrity, overall coherence, and a compelling storyline.

The second step entailed obtaining elements of the hermeneutic narrative construction. This involved highlighting cues or references in the immediate text that pointed beyond it to other, secondary texts. For example, a reference to ''Miller Brewery'' pointed to a previous case in the early 1990s when the brewery threatened to file suit against the City of LA's plan to introduce recycled water into the brewery's water supply. This then entailed tracing back to a cache of texts revolving around the Miller case. We summarized the additional themes and storylines in a hermeneutic interpretation that allowed a more multi-aspect narrative of the water reuse issue. Another example is finding a reference in the primary text to the word, discrimination. Working through this thread, we found other text suggesting that the sense of discrimination to Valley residents was not just embedded in race difference but also working class, blue-collar votes. Adding this thread into the narrative thus added descriptive and analytical richness. It also helps explain why the issue was so quickly politicized. The whole process took place over 7 months, from April to October, 2010.

The initial reading, the primary narrative (sense), is then supplemented with a reading of the secondary texts (reference) and, finally, the meaning of the whole store of evidence then reassessed. Ideally, this dialectic can be repeated as many times as needed, though we go through the process just once in this study. In this article, we do not elaborate on yet more

avenues for verifying the credibility of the reconstructed narrative, which is triangulation. The hermeneutic analysis can and should be tested against other sources of evidence, including prior interviews with stakeholders, statistical evidence, and verification ex post with some of the key actors (and we did the latter, in fact).

THE CASE STUDY

LA, located in a near desert, gets its water from three sources: about 60% of its supply comes from the LA Aqueduct system (which delivers water from distant Owens Valley), 15% from the San Fernando groundwater basin, and 25% from the State Water Project (bringing water from Northern California and the Colorado River).

The city's DWP opened its first aqueduct on November 5, 1913, after which the population of LA swelled rapidly. In 1970, another aqueduct was built to cope with increasing demand, which angered the Owens Valley residents, whose protests included setting dynamite to the project. As more water was diverted to LA, Mono Lake dried up completely, leaving a veritable dust bowl. In 1994, however, a regulatory ruling required the DWP to return some of this water to replenish Mono Lake. To compound the DWP's supply problems, other legal developments have similarly reduced the DWP's rights to water from the State Water Project and Colorado River (LADWP 2005).

Since the early 1990s, LA has been looking at water reuse to reduce LA's dependence on imported water. It is against this backdrop that the environmental impact report for the water reuse plant called EVWRP began. The project would take up to 50,000 acre feet per year of reclaimed water from the Donald C. Tillman Water Reclamation Plant (Tillman Plant), originally built in 1985, in the Sepulveda Basin and send it to the northeastern part of the San Fernando Valley area of LA for groundwater recharge. The reclaimed water would blend with the existing groundwater that makes up part of the potable water supply. In July 1991, the DWP began to study the option seriously.

Years later, in a session of the LA City Council in 2000, the DWP made an announcement: the EVWRP was complete. Not only had the DWP built the project but also they already started running it on a trial basis. At a cost of $55 million, the DWP had built the pumping plant and pipeline and was ready to recycle enough water to eventually supply 80,000–120,000 new homes. The City Council was surprised to hear it. When did this all happen, the council members wondered? As it turns out, the project was endorsed by the US Environmental Protection Agency and other resource agencies and approved by the City Council 5 years earlier, in 1995. But back then, it escaped notice.

In 2000, however, it was a different time. Immediately after DWP's presentation to City Council, Council member Joel Wachs would question why the project obtained approval in the first place, ostensibly under the radar. Wachs and his chief of staff, Greg Nelson, would become chief critics of the project from that point onward. Others joined in opposing the project: Councilwoman Laura Chick, City Attorney James Hahn, and State Senator Richard Alarcon. One of the most active members of the public was Gerald Silver, then president of the Homeowners of Encino, which represented the neighborhood adjacent to the Tillman Plant. As Silver described, the DWP public hearings in 1995 were attended by the same handful of people who were always there, and it was business as usual. But this project caught his attention, and he wondered why there was not more public scrutiny of it. He began raising questions that the DWP did not seem to be answering. Still, the project obtained environmental certification and City Council approval. But Silver kept doing

research. Now, in 2000, his questions and the research he had compiled began catching other people's attention—particularly Wachs and Nelson.

The flurry of email messages that went back-and-forth between Silver, Nelson, and others soon reached the desk of the *LA Daily News*. Unlike the *LA Times*, which is historically a major power broker in LA politics (particularly under its first owner, Otis Chandler), the *Daily News* was, and is, rather something of a bit player. The *LA Times* supported the project, so why should not the *Daily News*? In the beginning, they did report positively on it. But on April 16, 2000, the *Daily News* published an op-ed piece with the title "Tapping Toilet Water." This would, almost immediately, tag the project with the unfortunate moniker, "toilet-to-tap," from that point on. The term would quickly become a buzzword.[1] Other homeowners and neighborhood groups would join the Encino residents in opposing the project. That there was real power behind the anti-reuse movement is undeniable. Shortly after the above events took place, DWP shelved the project, which has remained dormant ever since.

ANALYSIS

Primary Interpretation

Thematic analysis of the archival text from the popular media showed a number of recurring themes that were used to characterize the anti-potable reuse movement. Table 1 summarizes these resonant themes and provides representative passages that illustrate each one. The themes shown in table 1 encapsulate the primary narrative that appears in media accounts of the controversy. For example, the role of political entrepreneurs is explained through reference to the upcoming city and state elections that would be held in 2001 (the year following the water reuse controversy). Wachs and Hahn were to be major candidates for mayor, Chick was planning to run for City Controller, and the primary text portrays these entrepreneurs as using the reuse project as an occasion to bask in the media spotlight. Similarly, the primary text also attributes the project's failure to the public's lack of information and subsequent vulnerability to negative publicity, as exemplified by the term, toilet-to-tap.

Explanation continues by exploring structures within this primary text. For example, we see the effective employment of the symbolic code (Barthes 1974) in the text, especially the juxtaposition of antithetical elements. These are illustrated in table 2, which analyzes how antithesis is found in each of the narrative themes found in table 1. Beginning with the antithesis, toilet/tap, this code is repeated several times in the text. For example, in juxtaposing the mayoral candidates and the DWP staff, we have a conflict between the politically entrepreneurial, wanting to change the order of things, and the bureaucratic, wanting to preserve it. Antithesis, in literature, often works as a barrier and, in this case, develops the narrative of infeasibility of the DWP project. As Barthes wrote, "Every joining of two antithetical terms, every mixture, every conciliation—in short, every passage through the wall of the Antithesis—thus constitutes a transgression" (Barthes 1974). The use of these elements of contradiction adds to the force of the narrative. The toilet/tap pair is

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1   To this day, it is uncertain who coined the term. Though most point to Gerald Silver, Silver says he thinks it may have originated around a similar project in nearby San Diego (personal communication with author). This stigma is sometimes referred to as the "yuck" factor (Leong 2010).

Table 1
Themes Found in the Primary Text

Primary Themes	Frequency (%)	Sample Text
Image and stigma: negative imagery, exemplified by the term, toilet-to-tap, defeated the project.	65	Most people interviewed recently wrinkled their noses and shook their heads at the mention of mixing purified toilet water into drinking water—even if the process provides safe and tasty water (*Los Angeles Daily News* 22 June 2008b).
		"This is human waste," says a spokeswoman for a San Fernando Valley homeowner association. "I'm very uneasy about that." Despite assurances by department officials that the water is safe to drink, she notes, "They also said that about Love Canal. And they have said all these lovely things about Agent Orange. I don't like to think about this." (*The Star Ledger* 24 April 2000)
Political entrepreneurship: candidates to the 2001 elections used to the project to score political points.	18	"The efforts garnered broad support for the project from the environmental community but the project became entangled in the political electoral process and was never operated as envisioned." (Recycled Water Task Force 2007)
		In the face of public outrage, then-City Attorney James Hahn suspended the project, saying the DWP had failed to adequately inform the public about its start-up and potential health risks. After he was elected mayor in 2001, Hahn formally killed the toilet-to-tap project (*Los Angeles Daily News* 23 October 2004).
Lack of information and transparency: People were not given enough information about reuse and reacted viscerally to what was a technically sound project.	16	Macpherson and Slovic say that many water quality professionals believe the public's lack of water knowledge is the single largest barrier to sustainable water management (Gunderson 2008).
		"They should have been far more candid on what was involved in the project. Reaching out means reaching out in a clear way that people will understand," said Gerald Silver, president of the Homeowners of Encino and a vocal critic of how the DWP handled the project (*Los Angeles Daily News* 23 October 2004).

Continued

Table 1 (continued)
Themes Found in the Primary Text

Primary Themes	Frequency (%)	Sample Text
Science gap: beyond the question of availability of information, what was available was often couched in scientific terms, which the public did not understand.	16	How can the public tell whether a large majority of the highest use chemicals in the United States pose health hazards—much less how serious the risks might be or whether those chemicals are actually under control? Yet, these unknown toxins will be recycled, treated with high doses of chlorine, and placed into our ground water? (Margolis 2007) "The people that came didn't seem to be angry—they seemed interested," said DWP General Manager S. David Freeman, who was on hand to answer questions. "I think there is a lack of understanding. A lot of people thought the toilet water went (directly) to the tap." (*Los Angeles Daily News* June 8 2000)

especially meaningful, as it evokes related contrasts between purity and danger, or the sacred and the profane, as Mary Douglas pointed out in her analysis of modern-day taboo (Douglas 1966). These oppositions create a dramatic tension that propels the primary narrative found in the popular media. We reconstruct the narrative by building it, in part, around these oppositions—for example, contrasting the behind-the-scenes machinations of the bureaucrat versus the barnstorming media savvy of the political entrepreneur.

The next step is to reconstruct the narrative that forms the basis of the popular media's representation of the anti-reuse side. This is an analysis of the narratives found on the "surface" of the text—that is, narrative elements directly written into the media text. As this is the immediately ostensible account, we will refer to this as the primary narrative. Similar to Feldman et al. (2004), we summarize the primary text in a representative storyline or narrative, shown in table 3. The reconstructed narrative embodies the primary themes described in table 1 and its plot written around the oppositions described in table 2.

Water reuse proponents, whom we will refer to as the pro-reuse (or pro-recycling) side, use this very same primary narrative to characterize the anti-potable reuse side. We see elements of the above primary interpretation appearing in various literature from the water industry and the media. The following are some typical statements made in the pro-reuse side's strategy/policy pieces:

Table 2
Recurrence of Antithesis in Primary Text

Antithetical Pairs	Explanation
Toilet/tap	Juxtaposition of purity and danger
Secrecy/information	Juxtaposition of open and closed
Common wisdom/science	Juxtaposition of expert and folk knowledge
politician/bureaucrat	Juxtaposition of entrepreneurship and inertia

Table 3
Primary Narrative Construction of the Controversy

The City of LA urgently needed the reuse project in order to offset diminishing rights to other water supplies. However, the public did not receive adequate information about the safety of the water. Opponents of it rebelled at the thought of wastewater being introduced into the water supply. They coined the term ''toilet-to-tap,'' which captured the public psyche and convinced people that the project would contaminate drinking water. DWP was accused of trying to approve a project stealthily, without public discussion. In contrast, a group of political entrepreneurs, eager to capture the public's attention a year before a tightly contested mayoral election, played up the issue into a public crusade and had the project shelved. The lesson is that the image problem needs to be overcome by better public outreach and education. If the public had a grasp of the technical merits of the project, controversy would not have ensued. Earlier public outreach and a more informed citizenry would also reduce the chance of political opportunism.

> However, just as construction [of the EVWRP] was being completed and the project was going to be started, the *Los Angeles Daily News* published the headline ''Tapping Toilet Water.'' As a result of this headline, and the interest it generated, startup of the EVWRP has been delayed for review of the project by the City Council. (Van Wagoner 2000)

> ''At times, the media's coverage of this topic has been very misleading,'' Kelly said. ''Public outcry against reuse has largely been a result of inaccurate and exaggerated language in the media. It can be complex for reporters with limited time to accurately depict the reuse process—they tend to jump to the obvious conclusions.'' (Gunderson 2008)

> ''We've learned the lessons of the past, especially as far as communication goes,'' Nahai said. ''We're putting ourselves in a position to roll out this program very publicly so that nobody feels that anything has been hidden or that there is anything to be suspicious or fearful about.'' (Cavanaugh 2008a)

The narrative in table 3 is a recurring one. It is just as clearly stated in the title of an article in a gray water association's newsletter: ''Recycled Sewage Water Could Become a Wave of Future Water Supply if Public Understood Science and Moved Beyond Imagery'' (Glick 2008). But as we will discuss below, the primary narrative does not suffice to capture the multiple motivations and power of the anti-reuse movement. On the side of the pro-reuse community, portraying the opposition solely with this primary narrative runs the danger of ignoring other issues that need to be confronted, if progress is to be made.

Hermeneutic Interpretation

The previous analysis allowed us to reconstruct the primary, or dominant narrative, that has been used to describe the controversial project. Ensuing efforts at improving public education about water reuse has been largely based on this narrative.

In this section, we seek out partially hidden issues that are not ostensibly addressed in the primary text. There are practical reasons for doing so. The immediate one is that, as much as the water reuse community has since done much to improve on public outreach, the fact is that the response may not be addressing lingering issues. Hermeneutics helps us understand the anti-reuse movement in more depth. Probing into deeper, even latent, issues allows us to better understand the power and sustainability of these movements. News articles about the project are, by and large, dominated by the themes listed in table 1, but every now and then, an obtuse reference is found, a link to something further back in the past or otherwise removed from the reuse issue, for example:

> Charles Brink, a member of the Valley VOTE group studying the prospect of Valley secession from Los Angeles, said the toilet-to-tap phrase could be misleading. "There's an awful lot of treatment between the toilet and the tap," he said. "It does sound horrible on the surface."

where a link to an altogether separate issue, Valley secession, is found. These links are tags that allow us to import different subtexts (in this case, a separate store of text related to the Valley secession movement) into the main one.

True enough, these more distal issues are usually drowned out by the larger and more prevalent claims found in the primary narrative. But the other, more oblique, references remain, like traces on a palimpsest. We now examine these other issues. In the following discussion, we list a number of these subtexts, illustrate them with some passages from the news articles in which they are alluded to, and explain their connection to the case study.

The Unknown

> "There's a cost to cleaning up the water," Wachs said. "But what could be more than the cost of cancer, the cost of dying and the cost of lawsuits? It shouldn't take another Erin Brockovich to force the city to protect the public's health." (*LA Times*, 09/06/2000)

> Dinkin [homeowner's association officer] was unimpressed by assurances by the water department that the water was safe. She told the paper, "They also said that about Love Canal. And they have said all these lovely things about Agent Orange." (Getzlaff 2000)

Contrary to the water reuse literature, there were issues that the science behind water reuse was not able to resolve at that time. The reference to Erin Brockovich expressed the deep impression that the movie about her life had on these policy actors. It captured the lingering doubt that the public and decision makers had about the science of reclaimed water. Contrary to the story told by the media, it was not just the aesthetic "yuck" factor that prevented the public from embracing the project but also unresolved issues around the science and pervasive mistrust of institutions.

Hexavalent chromium, the central culprit in the Erin Brockovich movie, was itself a focal point in the uncertainty about the water science. There were questions about other trace elements that the scientific community could not put to rest—for example, viruses, dioxin, and, more recently, endocrine disruptors. One water expert, from a nearby university, would later say: "The world's scientific community does not and will not know all the toxic agents and carcinogens that may be able to make it through the indirect reclaimed water process. It took decades until the risk of Chromium VI materialized. . . . Some say that this water will be the cleanest water in LA. And that may possibly be true in terms of the known agents that we can test for. But this program is like Russian roulette. It may be fine for years, until an unknown agent makes it through the process and kills people in LA." (Oppenheimer 2007). Oblique references to Agent Orange and Love Canal that we found in the text can also be understood in this light (Getzlaff 2000; Reuters 2000).

The lack of public confidence in the science flies in the face of claims made by the water community about the reliability of the water treatment technology—an uncertainty which some scientists have since acknowledged. The National Research Council raises the issue of unidentified contaminants remaining even after advanced treatment: "Because it will never be possible to identify all the potentially harmful chemicals in treated

wastewater, it will never be possible to definitively say the risk they pose has been reduced to acceptable levels" (National Research Council 1998, 70).

Other subtexts are imported into the case. In 1998, the City Council took up the case of possible chemical contamination of the Valley groundwater from the Marquardt Co., a former munitions plant near the Van Nuys airport. This was compounded by a subsequent opinion by DWP's Watermaster for the Valley that there may be other such sites, some possibly more serious, in the area. These fears extended to doubts about the reliability of the Tillman Plant. In other words, what if the processes leaked, what if the processes broke down? As we will discuss below, there was enough history around the plant to warrant such questions.

The Lessons of History: Stealth and Insult

> Many years ago Congress declared the Sepulveda Basin, owned by the Army Corps of Engineers, to be used exclusively for flood control and recreational purposes. Then, over the objections of Valley residents and the Army Corps of Engineers, the City of Los Angeles grabbed Sepulveda Basin open space land and built the Donald C. Tillman (DCT) sewage processing plant. Today the plant processes approximately 60,000,000 gallons per day of raw sewage. Now decades later, the Sepulveda Basin is again under attack. This time it is being given high priority to build an advanced water treatment plant on land dedicated to wildlife open space and recreational uses. (Silver 2010)

The toilet-to-tap project is not an isolated case. In fact, as long-time residents will recall, it was just the latest in a long history of issues surrounding the Tillman Plant, going back to its first beginnings. The history surrounding the plant is comprised of a number of overlapping subtexts that help us understand the larger meaning of the issue for residents of Van Nuys, Encino, and Studio City.

Just a year before the reuse project was unveiled, four million gallons of raw sewage spilled from the plant onto nearby Woodley Avenue Park, due to plant computers shutting down during a Y2K testing. We can find this in an article entitled "Y2K test causes stink; Computer sends sewage into park" (Hiestand 1999). Six years earlier, in 1993, the Tillman plant was the site of another public embarrassment. In the ominously named Cesspool Dumping Project, the city sought to take untreated septage from unsewered areas in Malibu and other hilltop areas, transport this in large vacuum trucks, and discharge it down a special manhole, housed in a warehouse structure next to the Tillman Plant. This was eerily similar to the toilet-to-tap situation, in that the city had already approved and built the cesspool project and was ready to begin operation. Residents, who did not originally catch the project during permitting, were only alerted when the city applied for a permit to widen Woodley Avenue to allow the additional truck traffic that was expected. An *LA Times* article reported:

> Bill Jasper, president of the Encino Property Owners Association, accused the city of trying to push the project through without appropriate input from residents. "This was kind of a stealth project that no one knew about," Jasper said.

These subtexts help us understand the depth of the claims about "stealth" on the part of the city. This encompasses a history of disenchantment with DWP and the ongoing "insult" to Valley residents of the Tillman Plant, including claims by antigrowth advocates in the Valley who protest water reclamation projects as growth inducing.

Rumors of Secession

> Recycled water also became a rallying point for secession advocates, who called "toilet to tap" another example of unfair treatment. The Valley would drink toilet water while the Westside would get the "good" water. (*Los Angeles Daily News*, June 22, 2008a)

We portray the secession issue as a subtext that is loosely attached to the primary text concerning the reuse project. But what this means, in reality, is that the indirect potable reuse project became a focal point for a host of other issues that drove the secession movement.

This connection was aided by the inclusion of a secession proposition in the 2001 polls. In this manner, through allusion, policy actors are able to bring other motivations to the issue, though not directly related to the project at hand. We find a number of other issues, such as old grievances over the perceived misallocation of tax revenues by City Hall, understaffing of Valley police, and the DWP rate setting. These issues did resonate with Valley residents, and it shows in their reaction to the EVWRP.

Discrimination

> "I think we heard what the real reason for the movement to secede was when we listened to the people who wanted to break away from [the Los Angeles Unified School District], some of the same people behind this initiative," said a moderator at a dialogue on the possibility of secession. "And that word was racism." (Garvey 1998)

Linking from the narrative on secession, we found some references to discrimination of the Valley by the rest of the city, with some race-based origins owing in part to the relatively higher number of African-Americans and Hispanics who live there. This narrative sees the policy makers in City Hall as "insulting" San Fernando Valley residents by pushing unpalatable policies down their throats—poor schools and city services, high sewer fees, inadequate policing, etc. Water recycling is just seen as one in a litany of woes (*Los Angeles Daily News* 2001) because the Valley is just politically acquiescent. The discrimination narrative appears to have three strands, one based on the relative political weakness of the Valley, the second which attributes this weakness to the fact that minorities make up a large proportion of Valley residents, and the third being a class-based discrimination against working class Valley residents.

But these subtexts are not necessarily shared by all. Most in the City Council certainly did not share the secessionist sentiment. Greg Nelson, one of the principal players in the anti-reuse movement, would later on propose an alternative to secession, which was the establishment of Neighborhood Councils all throughout LA to interface between community and city government. His idea was adopted into the reauthorized City Charter of 1999, and Nelson would go on to become the first director of the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, which oversaw creation of the councils. It is, perhaps, not surprising that one of the first achievements of the new councils was to successfully overturn a rate increase proposed by the DWP.

Narrative elements need not be common to all the stakeholders, in all its parts. There does not need to be one meta-narrative that encapsulates all the individual sub-narratives brought into the situation. One member of the network may see, in the potable reuse project,

a rationale for secession, but other members of the network may be driven by other considerations. Similarly, when Silver would send information to Nelson and others, who would then send messages to their other contacts, it was not simply a repetition of the same message over and over. This illustrates the kind of plurivocity that narratives can afford.

Although it is true that city politics and the stigma factor worked to overturn the EVWRP project, these factors did not simply work their effect on their own. Rather, they drew power and meaning from other elements, which we found in the hermeneutic interpretation, that embedded them in long-standing issues that held moral suasion over the public. The stigma of toilet-to-tap does not defeat water projects everywhere, and indeed, direct potable reuse has been carried out in other places around the world. Policymakers have successfully implemented indirect potable reuse in Orange County, California, the Public Utilities Board in Singapore, and the Windhoek Plant in Namibia (Miller 2006). Although there is a lot still being debated about the long-term affects on health of such water reuse, no adverse health effects have been reported in these countries (Lazarova et al. 2001). But this highlights the value of hermeneutics. The toilet-to-tap issue has arisen in all the above contexts and is essentially a shared, almost universal theme. But our analysis has brought out other themes that help us understand things particular to the LA case. Hermeneutic analysis allows us to understand how different contexts give rise to differing narratives. The final step, which is getting a sense of the whole, primary text as well as subtexts, allows a better understanding of the situation.

To be clear, our analysis has revealed some fundamental concerns that characterize the anti-water reuse coalition, but there was no formal organizational unit or coalition per se. As our conversations with some of the policy actors suggest, those aligned against the project never once met as a group. But that is part of the power of the narrative analysis—that is, the structure of the coalition, or the notion that there is an anti-reuse movement at all, derives directly from the narrative itself. To the extent that some or all aspects of the narrative were shared, the narrative itself is what binds diverse parties into a coherent movement and lends coherence to their sometimes separate efforts (Weick 1995; see also Fischer 2003; Hajer 1993; Lejano and Wessells 2006). This has implications for practice, too, particularly in understanding how a coalition attains critical mass through construction of a narrative that is inclusive of different parties. It helps us understand why narrative construction (i.e., identifying issues, seeking out stakeholders, and crafting the message) is so important to organizers. The coalition of actors might simply be an artifact of the narrative analysis. On the other hand, actors may be working within a complex network even if the actor network is never formally recognized (Latour 2005). There is always a need to assess narrative constructions of such networks against empirical evidence of such.

In the case at hand, we have reason to believe that there was indeed some recognition of an informal coalition of anti-reuse parties. Though they never formally banded together, they were conscious of each other's efforts to protest the initiative and kept each other informed of their movements by phone and email (author's conversation with Greg Nelson). As Ricoeur might say, when we move from sense to reference, emerging truths do not simply pertain to the immediate semantic code but, somehow, refer to the world outside in valid ways (Ricoeur 1976).

The plurivocity of narrative also allows actors to tell the story in ways not told by the others. A network of actors can be bound by a basic story, but the latter can be an assemblage of different narrative elements that not all the actors share completely The

hermeneutic analysis suggests that the anti-reuse movement drew from perceptions of unfair treatment by the city in the past, but not all the actors shared this. Some reacted simply from fear of contaminated water. The overarching narrative, which is opposition to the project, can contain multiple subplots.

DISCUSSION: HERMENEUTICS AND PRACTICE

Although we see the primary contribution of this research to be a methodological/analytic one, the hermeneutic approach also has implications for practice. First of all, who would employ this approach? Simply put, it is meant for any policy actor with an interest in identifying the factors that foment conflict over a policy initiative. This would include proponents, whether public or private, of the initiative. In the LA case, this would include public managers or agency staff dedicated to public outreach. This would also be of great interest to professional facilitators, process experts, and mediators who are often asked to step in and initiate conflict resolution mechanisms. Periods of reflection-in-action, when such a hermeneutic might be used to deepen understanding of the situation, are always present (Schön 1983). For the mediator, the first instance when this occurs is during the preparatory phase, which often involves stakeholder analysis and conflict assessment (Susskind, Sarah, and Jennifer 1999). For the agency's public outreach coordinator, this would be useful when designing public deliberation processes, since these forums need to identify and address the most deeply held issues. Insights from critical hermeneutic analysis might be brought directly into public deliberation, as well as into the reflective practice of the policy analyst herself (Fischer 2003).

There has been, by now, much written on the concept and practice of participatory and collaborative governance. Although the literature identifies difficulties with direct stakeholder participation in public policymaking (e.g., see Cooke and Kothari 2006; Day 1997; Irvin and Stansbury 2004; Maguire and Lind 2003), the vision of collaboration is clear: democratization of decision making allows inclusion of the most affected and can facilitate policy implementation (e.g., see Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Forester 1999; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Healey 1993; Roberts 2004). Insofar as one important goal of public deliberation is deeper understanding of how different publics feel about a policy initiative, the deliberative ideal shares a common goal with hermeneutics. A hermeneutic component could be part of the social learning process that Innes and Booher (2010) describe as necessary for shared meanings or commitments to evolve (38). It expands Forester's notion of "listening as analysis" where we endeavor to listen to those whom we cannot encounter face-to-face (Forester 2008).

Hermeneutics can complement deliberative models in important ways. As Feldman, Khademian, and Quick (2009) point out, participation does not necessarily mean inclusion of those most affected, those least able to participate, etc. (also Quick and Feldman 2011). Day (1997) points out how, in complex urban environments, representativeness of views heard in public forums may be impossible to attain. Hermeneutics can be used to fill in narratives that are missing or incompletely told. Depth of interpretation is needed when it is hard to get the disenfranchised to participate or when those participating tend to say only those things that align with broadly conceived public goals. Aspects of meaning are always partly withheld. In the LA case, an example of this would be the undercurrent of antigrowth sentiments that none of the anti-reuse advocates ever vocalize.

The water industry's notion of public outreach assumes a unidirectional flow of information that Rowe and Frewer (2005) refer to as Public Communication and describe as a "closed" mode of response. Hermeneutics is open to varied meanings, as opposed to a means–end orientation when someone's reminiscences about their youth may be considered *non sequitur* but, in fact, relevant to the matter at hand. These authors write: "In summary, active participants only represent potential information sources: they need to be engaged in such a manner that comprehensive, appropriate information (and not incomplete or irrelevant information) is elicited from them ..." (Rowe and Frewer 2005, 270).

The methodology described herein can be utilized even in an informal way, as public managers deliberately tap into the layered dimensions of context to gain new insights. In the end, the analyst would test the hermeneutic interpretation using the aforementioned criteria for judging narrative credibility. For example, does the resulting interpretation give a more coherent account of more aspects of a situation? In the LA case, we see that this is true—the hermeneutic account is able to explain why it is that providing the public with more and better information did not quell opposition to the project. It is better able to explain the strength of the anti-reuse movement as stemming not just from aesthetic disenchantment with the project but deeply held mistrust of city government, lingering scientific uncertainty, and historical precedent.

CONCLUSION

We have argued for a hermeneutic approach to analyzing public controversies. Popular media representations of such issues can fail to reveal the true interests of each party and hence the fundamental causes of conflict. Second, the conventional narrative builds on and cements locked, antithetical positions which pit one camp against the other, with no other apparent solution other than the force of numbers (as by a referendum) or sheer political might (a power play). Neither presents a good policy outcome. Hermeneutic interpretation, on the other hand, affords rich depiction through inquiry into context and history, reference to distal but related themes, and a commitment to the role of subtexts in understanding.

Feldman and Quick (2009) write about "resourcing," which is a process by which previous engagements with community, whether cooperative or divisive, are brought to bear in the situation at hand—for example, mobilizing pent-up anger into community protest or even rechanneling it into innovative modes of reengagement. Relevant to this idea, too, is Bourdieu's (1977) proposition that different forms of capital exhibit a kind of fungibility across domains, such as between the moral capital of community disenchantment and the social capital of mobilization. Hermeneutic analysis offers a lens by which these otherwise latent stores of potentially resourced elements might be identified by the public manager and utilized constructively. Applied hermeneutics can be one of a suite of strategies involved in resourcing.

Understanding the inherent plurivocity of narratives and controversies is crucial if we are to account for the potency of a movement. If the multiple stories woven into the overall narrative include one of mistrust of the agency, then bombarding the public with more public relations campaigns, instead of genuine deliberation, may stoke greater disenchantment. On the other hand, if the agency decides to embark on a deliberative process, then hermeneutics can be employed to better understand the different concerns found in a community that is never monolithic.

Issues such as water reuse are often portrayed as simply being matters of science. We hope that our analysis shows that narrative and interpretation have a place at the table. As Ospina and Dodge (2005) point out, stories can often add value to policy issues because "they contain within them, knowledge that is different from what we might tap into when we do surveys, collect and analyze statistics . . ." (43). Our article joins with others in the public administration field who work to demonstrate that narrative approaches add the same rigor and relevance to social science as positivist methods (Crotty 1998; Hummel 1991; Schmidt 1994). In the DWP case, we see that the issues alleged to have been settled by science were in reality not settled at all. This is not simply due to a lack of information on the part of the public but a feature of the science itself.

We hope we have made a case for narrative, as well as the capacity of hermeneutics to elucidate the sometimes impenetrable logic of disenchantment. It is not in the dispassionately rational model of interest-centered pluralism that controversy becomes comprehensible. People mobilize because they care or have been hurt and somehow moved. Rather, it is narrative that gets to the heart of the matter.

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