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Foreword

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Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations highlights the key role that stories play in shaping our memories, knowledge and beliefs. The editors, Melanie Green, Jeffrey Strange and Timothy Brock, have brought together an insightful group of investigators and their chapters collectively create a picture of an emerging and lively research domain with many questions of interest to various disciplines. At the heart of the endeavor is the idea that stories are a particularly compelling source of information and that public narratives (e.g., books, movies, news stories, TV programs) have the potential to have a profound and far-reaching influence on what we remember, know and believe. It is not hard to imagine a future where the influence of public narratives is even greater as the world increasingly is connected via television, movies, and the Internet. The focused and systematic study of the impact of narratives contributes to our understanding of cognition, emotion, and social processes in a number of ways.

This volume stimulates thinking about the cognitive and social mechanisms of learning and memory, and of persuasion and influence. Can we use available theoretical constructs (e.g., constructive and reconstructive processing, story schemas, situation models, causal chains, source monitoring, counterarguing, accessibility, social norms, social learning) to understand the impact of public narratives, or does this domain require new principles that might, in turn, broaden our conceptualization of cognitive and social processes in other domains? It causes us to think about how effective narratives are crafted, the relation between cognition and emotion, the tech-

niques by which fictional accounts evoke emotions, individual differences in the tendency to be "transported" by stories, and about the relation between factual and narrative truth. It prompts reflection about the origins of self-identity. It challenges us to grapple with difficult and fundamental issues that require tradeoffs between values, such as freedom of expression and accountability. If the impact of narratives is potentially great, who should control the content and distribution of public narratives? Should we give more thought to self-censoring what we process?

We want our experiences to have an impact on us (create memories, knowledge, and beliefs). However, the fact that some experiences might have uninvited (or unwanted) impact creates a profound dilemma—how to segregate the wanted from the unwanted influences in any particular situation. Reality monitoring (or source monitoring, more generally) refers to the imperfect processes used to differentiate the multiple sources of the mental experiences we call memories, knowledge and beliefs. Investigating the impact of stories and public narratives on thought and behavior provides a useful way of investigating the joint operation of two aspects of reality monitoring—people's ability to accurately identify the sources of potential influence and their ability to evaluate and "correct" their memories, knowledge, and beliefs for specific sources of influence when they want to do so. It is tempting to think that we have control over the impact that narratives have on us (why else would we see some of the movies we do?), but how accurate is that belief? And if we do have some control, what is that nature of that control?

The application of findings and theoretical ideas from basic research is not always obvious to those who might be in the best situation to apply them. There have been some notable efforts to create such bridges, for example, in education, eyewitness testimony, jury decision-making, and reports of recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse. Through such efforts, teachers, police, lawyers, judges, and therapists can better see the relation between research findings and the way they present information to students or juries, conduct lineups, interview children, or explore adults' early childhood memories. Likewise, relevant empirical facts and theoretical ideas should be accessible to both the creators and consumers of public narratives. Such facts and theoretical ideas are most persuasive when demonstrated in ways that approximate real-world situations (e.g., showing that family planning discussions in soap operas affect viewers' attitudes or behavior)—that is, if they tell a good story. The chapters in *Narrative Impact* treat the influence of stories from applied as well as theoretical perspectives. They consider the influence of stories on education, health behavior, and political judgment, as well as the cognitive and social processes through which stories derive their force. The

book will appeal not only to academicians, but also to creators, critics, and consumers of stories.

The study of narratives provides a clear bridge between examining cognition on an individual level and at the social–cultural level. Given what we know about the constructive and reconstructive nature of cognition, and our less than perfect reality monitoring processes, what is our obligation, and what strategies might we use, to protect ourselves and others from "false" information that might distort our memories, knowledge, and beliefs? What are the personal, social, and cultural consequences, if any, of experiencing the stories from newspapers, TV, movies, novels, video game worlds, the Internet, and the virtual reality experiences to come?

One line of argument is that, although there surely are influences from these narratives, we cannot predict the effect from the content of a narrative because individuals bring an infinite variety of unique combinations of experiences to any particular target event, and who knows what they will take from it? In short, if the influence cannot be predicted in any particular case, we can hardly be held accountable for producing or consuming any particular narrative. On the other hand, narratives (like any communication) derive much of their power not from the idiosyncrasies in our varied interpretations, but from the fact that there is some consensus in what people are likely to take from them. What creates shared narrative impact? Popular books, TV programs, movies, news sources, and so forth, provide a major source of the information consumed by people daily. To what extent do these sources create a shared cultural vision and what do we think about that vision? To what extent are public narratives sources of our expectations about people of different gender, ethnic, racial, and age groups, our understanding of typical behaviors in different professions, our trust or mistrust in public institutions, our beliefs about the origins of psychological problems, our expectations about what an abduction by aliens might be like, and so forth?

Whose narratives and visions of reality should prevail? News media, government, lawyers, scientists, religious groups, school boards, parents, producers of movies and TV programs? Is incidental influence of less or more concern than intended influence? Can the power of entertainment narratives to promote pro-social messages be harnessed in a way that does not elicit fears of brainwashing? Can the issue of quality control be addressed without eliciting fears of censorship? How do within and cross-institutional reality monitoring processes operate? How should they?

The collection of chapters in *Narrative Impact* instantiates an exciting, intellectually stimulating frontier of interdisciplinary research at the intersect among basic cognitive and social processes, sociology, po-

litical science, literary and film studies, and media studies. Furthermore, this domain of investigation raises important issues of professional practice and public policy. Different readers will come away intrigued by different aspects of this rich domain, but everyone will have a deeper appreciation of what is involved in the narrative experience, and of the potential influence of the stories in their past and their future.

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