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Who tells which story and why?
Micro and macro contexts in narrative

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Abstract

This article focuses on the inter-relations between storytelling and micro and macro contexts. It explores how narrative activity is shaped by and shapes in unique ways the local context of interaction in a community of practice, an Italian American card-playing club, but also illustrates how the storytelling events that take place within this local community relate to wider social processes. The analysis centers on a number of topically linked narratives to argue that these texts have a variety of functions linked to the roles and relationships negotiated by individuals within the club and to the construction of a collective identity for the community. However, the narrative activities that occur within the club also articulate aspects of the wider social context. It is argued that, in the case analyzed here, local meaning-making activities connect with macro social processes through the negotiation, within the constraints of local practices, of the position and roles of the ethnic group in the wider social space. In this sense, narrative activity can be seen as one of the many symbolic practices (Bourdieu 2002 [1977]) in which social groups engage to carry out struggles for legitimation and recognition in order to accumulate symbolic capital and greater social power.

Keywords: narrative; identity; Italian Americans; stories; storytelling; migration.

1. Introduction

Recent research on narrative has emphasized the situatedness of storytelling and its embedding in social life. Researchers have shown that narratives exhibit complex and fascinating relationships with different contexts, and that their functions and structure vary a great deal as a result of their insertion in interactional situations and social practices. While in the past
narrative studies mostly focused on sociolinguistic interview narratives (Labov and Waletzky 1967), conversational stories (Polanyi 1985; Ochs and Capps 2001), and autobiographical accounts (Linde 1993), in the last twenty years a growing interest in narratives in context has generated a significant body of scholarship devoted to enrich our understanding of narratives as interactional and social accomplishments in a variety of social settings (see De Fina and Georgakopoulou forthcoming). Thus, researchers in sociolinguistics, anthropology, and social psychology have analyzed the roles and functions of narratives in social events such as family dinners (Ochs and Taylor 1995), therapeutic sessions (Fasulo 1999; Mattingly 1998), workplace meetings (Holmes 2006), legal interviews (Trinch 2003), trials (Harris 2005), and classroom events (Baque-dano Lopez 2001).

The study of the embedding of narratives within specific settings has had important theoretical consequences since it has led to an awareness of the context dependence of narrative structure and function, and to an understanding of storytelling as a type of discourse practice (De Fina 2003a, 2003b) that shapes and is shaped by contexts rather than as a fixed genre with a predetermined structure. Thus, a conception of narrative as practice has led to the study of the specific ways in which narrative activity fits within wider social events. Besides illuminating the local context, however, narrative analysis has also showed that there are far-reaching connections between the micro and the macro, the interaction at hand, and social roles and relationships that transcend the immediate concerns of interactants involved in local exchanges.

The connections between micro and macro level have been investigated, among other fields, in gender research, where scholars have been able to show that narrative styles and roles taken up at a local level for example by children (Sheldon and Engstrom 2005) or teenagers (Georgakopoulou 2006) mirror and re-contextualize a division of labor that exists between men and women at the level of society at large. Also, work on narrative and identity has illustrated how shared ideologies and stereotypes about social categories of belonging become a resource for local self and other positioning and identity construction (Bucholtz 1999; Kiesling 2006; De Fina 2006) for individuals and groups. In the field of anthropology, authors such as Hufford (1995) have shown how narrators telling stories centered on local characters and concerns recontextualize social struggles involving different historical stages in the life of communities. These works point to the existence of many different levels and modes of interconnection between the local and the global, and in doing so they contribute to a movement toward a more general rethinking of the interactions between micro and macro in sociolinguistic theory.
(Blommaert et al. 2005). The investigation of how these links emerge in particular instances of interaction needs to be pursued in order to account for the power of storytelling as a transforming discursive practice.

In this paper, I explore how storytelling is shaped and shapes in unique ways the local context of interaction in a community of practice (Wenger 1998; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992), an Italian American card-playing club, but I also focus on how the storytelling events that take place within this local community relate to wider social processes. More specifically, I analyze a number of topically linked narratives to argue that these texts have a variety of functions linked to the roles and relationships negotiated by individuals within the club and to the projected image of the organization as a collective entity. However, I also attempt to elucidate the ties between the narrative activities that occur within the club and some aspects of the wider social context. I argue that, in the case analyzed here, a link between local meaning-making activities and macro social processes can be found in the negotiation, at the local level and within the constraints of local practices, of the position and roles of the ethnic group in the wider social space. Such position and roles are configured through narratives that involve processes of explanation and representation of social relations and moral values forming part of a wide array of cultural practices in which the ethnic group as a collective agent is engaged in other fields of social activity. In this sense, narrative activity can be seen as one of the many symbolic practices (Bourdieu 2002 [1977]) in which social groups engage to carry out struggles for legitimation and recognition in order to accumulate symbolic capital and, ultimately, greater social power.

2. Data and subjects

The narratives I discuss come from an ethnographic project involving participant observation through notes, tape and video recording, and interviews that I carried out between 2002 and 2003 with an Italian American club, the Circolo della Briscola, operating in the Washington area. The data come from five audio-taped sessions of about two hours each.

Il Circolo della Briscola is an all-men club founded in 1991 by an American-born man of Calabrese origin. The Circolo meets once a month to play Briscola, and, to a lesser extent, Tressette, both traditional Italian card games. At the time of the data collection the club comprised 47 members. Most of the participants are between the ages of 55 and 65; so many of them are retired. The men’s social background is middle and upper middle class. Some of the members are professionals, such as
architects, engineers, medical doctors; others are public employees, teachers, travel agents, etc. With respect to origins, two main groups can be distinguished: the first group includes 24 second- or third-generation immigrants who mostly come from traditional areas or cities of migration in the northeast such as New York City, Baltimore, or Pittsburgh. The second group is composed of 23 first-generation immigrants who were born in Italy. These Italian-born members speak Italian fluently, and most of them tend to prefer it to English as their language of communication. They have a strong connection with the country of origin in terms of contact with relatives and travel. American-born members usually do not speak Italian or speak a little, and have varying passive or active competence in Standard Italian and the dialects spoken in their families (there are many members of Sicilian or Calabrese origin, but also men who come from Abruzzo and Molise, Friuli or Veneto). Their degree of contact with Italy varies, but many of them have traveled there as tourists.

As mentioned, the Club usually meets once a month. The *Briscola* night is a complex social event divided into different phases and activities. At the beginning of the meeting there is a phase of about an hour characterized by social activities, such as wine drinking and dinner during which the president makes announcements and members make decisions about club events and activities. After dinner, there is another phase in which the focus is on playing. During this phase, tables of four players are formed and the *Briscola* or *Tressette* games start. The narratives that I found in the data transcribed were all told during the ‘socializing’ phase, during wine drinking or dinner, when players chat freely with each other. There is very little narrative activity during the games since talk focuses either on the play or around teasing and joking related to the games. Among the narratives told during or before dinner, I found a number of stories, which I have called ‘the Italian stories’ to reflect the fact that they are all related to topics dealing with Italy or Italians. These narratives are:

a. Travel accounts recounting trips to Italy and/or related events
b. ‘Heritage narratives’ about Italian parents and grandparents
c. Narratives centered around stereotypes about Italy

In this paper, I focus on travel accounts and heritage narratives, however some of the travel narratives that I analyze also dealt with stereotypes.

3. **Storytelling in the local context**

In this section, I illustrate how the Italian stories can be placed and understood within the local context of the *Circolo della Briscola*’s
activities and how they participate in the shaping of aspects of the club’s life. The questions that I focus on here are why certain types of narratives are told at certain moments of the Briscola nights, what kinds of social actions members of the community accomplish through their telling, and how narrative structure responds to these characteristics. The focus of this section is therefore on the functioning of stories within the micro context of the Circolo della Briscola. Thus, before proceeding to the analysis, I briefly discuss the notion of context.

According to Goodwin and Duranti (1992), context is anything that can provide the frame of interpretation of a focal event, such as the setting, the physical orientation of participants, language itself (for example, through genre or intertextual connections), and larger extra-situational conditions. In my view, a good way of thinking about this embedding is to imagine the focal event as a point lying in the middle of concentric frames that widen more and more as they move further from the center. Young (1987) represented conversational narratives as involving at least three frames: the world of the conversation, the taleworld (the storytelling event), and the storyrealm (the world of the story). But narratives embedded in social events involve further connections between the storytelling event and the social event in which the latter is embedded. Bauman (1986) illustrated the working of these multiple embeddings in his analysis of narratives told by dog traders in Canton, Texas. He showed that in order to understand the structure and function of those narratives, the analyst needed to place them within the frame of trading as a significant social event with its own rules and organization to which social actors bring their own objectives and motives. Thus, in order to understand any kind of narrative activity, it is necessary to uncover through ethnographic observation the particular and often subtle links that connect narrators and the narratives they tell with the social activities in which they are engaged. In the case of the Circolo della Briscola, as we will see, the following elements of the context seem to be relevant to illuminate the relations between the storytelling event and the frame of the social event under analysis, the Briscola night:

- The topic of the stories
- The activity within the event
- The identity of participants
- The structural properties of the ‘genre’ produced

As we will see, the interplay of these elements constitutes a frame for understanding how meanings are built at the local level of storytelling. However, I will also argue that there are elements that connect storytelling as practiced at the micro level to aspects of the macro context, in this
case the status of power relations among ethnic groups. The analysis of language in context requires attention to both aspects of contextualization, since none of them is independent of the other. The connections between these broader conditions and the local storytelling event will be the focus of Section 4.

3.1. Travel narratives

The narratives that I analyze in this section are travel accounts. Travel accounts were often told in connection with talk about origins and my own Sicilian origin was often a trigger for these kinds of accounts. As will be discussed below, they are not ‘stories’ in the Labovian sense of presenting interesting or unusual events around which the actions develop (Labov and Waletzky 1967); rather, they are narratives in that they represent recapitulations of past experience. However, in order to evidence the structural characteristics, I divided them into clauses following Labov’s model of narrative units. Labov (1972: 364) distinguishes between orientation clauses (abbreviated as OR in the transcripts) that ‘identify in some way the time, place, persons, and their activity or the situation’, complicating action clauses (abbreviated as CA in the transcripts) that present the main action in the story, and evaluation clauses (abbreviated as EV in the transcripts), which convey the point of the story. Notice that utterances by recipients are not easy to describe within Labov’s model (see lines 14–18 in Example [2]), so I have left them unclassified. The following two fragments present narrative accounts of travel to Sicily (see the appendix for transcription conventions):

(1)

1 Andy: The standard of living is extraordinary compared to
2 what I saw when I was a boy.
3 Bob: Yea? Were you from, are you from Sicily?
4 Andy: No, but I went there once with my family, with my
5 parents to visit with relatives, it was right after the war,
6 and now I see it=
7 Ron: =It’s very different yea.
8 Andy: It’s night and day,
9 → uh, my wife is not Italian, OR
10 she expected to see women in shawls OR
11 ((general laughter))
12 the first thing she saw was a marathon of women
13 [riding in shorts through the city, through Messina. CA
14 Bob: [Ya?
Carl: My grandmother dressed like that, you know.
that’s what they used to wear.
Andy: No longer!
Carl: Oh ya yea!
Andy: Not any more!

Researcher (Res)
John: Oh I like pizzelles, I haven’t had these in years.
Ray: Where are you from?
John: Well, my father came here from Ragusa, father’s side,
my mother is molisana.
((noise, parallel conversations))
John: You know we went to Palermo, you are from Palermo?
Res: Yes Palermo.
John: We were in Palermo, Trapani, uh,
Charlie: ((surprised tone)) You drove through Palermo?
((noise, parallel conversations))
John: Yes.
((noise, parallel conversations))
Larry: I have a distant cousin in Sicily and
my, we were in Sicily,
I took my older kids and my wife
and my uncle was, “No need, don’t go to Palermo,
don’t go to Sicily”
Dan: Why?
Ray: Why?
Frank: When was this?
Larry: Ninety eight.
Frank: Because that’s changed (…)
John: I just went to Sicily with my brother,
you know [I knew nothing about Sicily]
I found the island absolutely beautiful,
completely opposite of the stereotype,
Ray: That’s (…)
John: the stereotype of the island being poor, being dry,
being crime ridden,
one of that, just relaxing

Both fragments are taken from dinner conversations in two different Brisc-cola nights. In Example (1), the travel narrative occurs during talk about Sicily. Bob has been asking me about the Mafia when Andy intervenes in
the conversation to comment on the fact that Sicily has changed radically in recent times (lines 1 and 2). At this point, Bob asks Andy if he is originally from Sicily (line 3) and Andy clarifies that he is not from Sicily but that he had visited it once with his parents and he had noticed the change in a subsequent visit (lines 4–6, 8). This last point is actually co-constructed with Ron (line 7). To back up this idea that Sicily has changed with respect to the past (the position expressed as ‘it’s night and day’, line 8), Andy inserts his narrative about travel there and about how his and his wife’s experience as tourists confirms an image of the island that is completely different from what people expect (lines 9–12). He mentions his wife’s expectations about seeing women dressed in traditional clothing (line 10) and the surprising fact that she found women running a marathon instead (line 12). The following lines (13–18) constitute evaluation clauses in which Andy and Carl co-construct the point that things have changed in Sicily and that the island is now not backward or traditional.

The second example also occurred during talk about origins. The conversation takes place among a group of six men, who are interacting during dinner. Ray asks John where he is from (line 2). John mentions his father’s Sicilian origins (line 3) and then observes that he has been to Palermo, inquires with me whether I come from there (line 5), and tells me about other places he visited in Sicily (line 7). At this point another club member, Charlie, asks in a surprised tone if he drove through Palermo (line 8). The question again presupposes, but does not explicitly mention, stereotypical images about danger and criminality in the island. The fact that such interpretations are presupposed is evident in the following brief narrative by Larry (lines 10–13) in which he recounts how he went to Sicily and how his uncle reacted negatively to his plan to go to Palermo and to Sicily in general. This text is not a story in the Labovian sense since it lacks a true complicating action. Also, the order of events is reversed since Larry went to Sicily after his uncle advised him not to, but nonetheless it is a recapitulation of past experience and it clearly has a point: to show that people are convinced that Sicily is dangerous. Again lines 14 to 18 show participants trying to make sense of the implicit message of the narrative by asking Larry the reasons for his uncle’s warning. At this point John launches on his own account of his trip to Sicily, which he uses to counter the stereotype about Sicily being crime ridden (lines 19–24).

Let us summarize some of the characteristics of these narratives in relation to the contextual factors proposed for analysis at the beginning of this paper:

Activity in which narratives are embedded: As mentioned, the narratives occur during dinner conversation, before or after official announcements
made by the president and they are embedded in talk about origins. Dinner time is a time designed for discussion of matters pertaining to the club and for socialization. The conversations and food sharing foster a positive atmosphere before the games. It is important to stress that dinner time is also a central moment for club members to get to know each other better if they are not acquainted, which is often the case.

**Structural characteristics:** The narratives are strongly embedded within surrounding talk and in that sense they are not ‘detachable’ as independent stories. As a consequence, although these texts are narratives in the general sense that they recapitulate past experience, they are not prototypical stories in the Labovian (1972) sense of texts constructed around complicating actions and unusual events. They present very scant, almost nonexistent complicating actions. In fact, in some cases (see lines 19–24 in the second narrative) they are mostly composed of orientation and evaluation clauses and are basically descriptive. If we look at narratives on a continuum of dimensions as proposed by Ochs and Capps (2001: 43), these can be seen as texts with a rather low tellability, or ‘low narrativity’ (Carranza 1998). This feature is related to the argumentative nature of the texts: narrators do not emphasize events, but rather use the narratives to discuss and explain ideas: in this case to dispute widespread prejudice about Sicily. As Ochs and Capps observed, conversational narratives are often more open ended and fluid than canonical stories, especially when they are embedded in argumentation or explanation. They are, in their terms, ‘sense making’ processes (Ochs and Capps 2001: 15), rather than finished products. In this case, all the narratives are used to reflect about Sicily and to discuss whether the island fits the stereotype of a backward and crime-ridden place.

**Identity of the participants** is an important parameter in the contextual embedding of these narratives. All participants in this conversation, except for John in excerpt (2) are US-born members. Although John was born in Italy, he moved to the United States when he was young and speaks predominantly in English.

Travel narratives appear to serve the important function of allowing members who are not Italian born or who have been in the United States for a long time, to showcase their origins and demonstrate that they travel to Italy and that they are acquainted with their country of origin. As we will discuss later, talk on ‘Italian links’ of which narrative is a part helps players emphasize the legitimacy of their membership in the club, but also allows them to get to know something about each other’s origins and position themselves vis-à-vis images and constructs about the country of origin.
3.2. Heritage narratives

Let us now turn to another group of narratives which, like the previous ones, are centered on Italian matters, but focus on a different topic: the experience of past generations of Italian immigrants in the United States. These narratives are ‘other oriented’ in the sense that their protagonists are not the narrators but rather their parents and grandparents. I present two of these narratives below and then discuss their functions and structure.

(3)

1 Dell: We brought some from Sicily, Sicily and Calabria, they make the best turroni, in Calabria, they are promoting it heavily now. (noise, parallel conversations))

4 Tony: But I agree they made a great impact on this country,

6 Sean: Yes they did,

7 Tony: On the United States,

8 Sean: Yes they did!

9 Tony: Huge impact, (.)

10 Sean: Well you know a lot of them, of them, most of them came because they had to (.)

12 and when they came here they just worked all day, I think my grandparents must have laid every brick in the city of (.)

15 Tony: Yeah (.)

16 Sean: They did well!

17 Tony: No no I mean they worked god damned hard, like my grandparents worked very hard, worked really hard (.)

20 Brian: (.)

21 Tony: Not only that, but just being Italian put people at the line factory (.)

23 Sean: That’s right, you couldn’t speak English, you had to find somebody who could to get you on the street to go to work!

26 Tony: But even their kids, uh speaking English well and going school was not easy until recently,

29 → my father went to medical school, CA with ten brothers and sisters,

31 my grandfather made, a decision
that the two boys would go to medical school, OR
two would go to college, OR
so he could afford it, OR
and even then it took all the brothers and sisters
in Brooklyn (…) OR
and so when he got out of medical school CA
one brother bought him his car, CA
another brother put a down payment on an
office for a year, CA
uh two other brothers got him, the equipment
he needed, CA
and this was the way it worked EV
and later my father with, with their sons
he helped them get through school CA
and that was a very very simple process, EV
but but nobody thought a second about it.= EV
Sean: =you know-
((interruptions, noises. Someone asks people if they want
pizza))
Sean: No grazie

(4) ((Beginning of the tape))
1 Frank: and my uncle Fred and my uncle Joe,
   (…)
2 Ben: Yea my father was (…) OR
3 Al: My father was a great charmer OR
4 Ben: My dad was a shoemaker, OR
came back from the war CA
and started selling, work boots, CA
within five years it was a shoe store CA
you could get a repair in the back OR
and in fifteen years he built up a big huge barber, CA
10 Ryan: Where was that? EV
11 Ben: In Pittsburg EV
12 Louis: He had a vision, you see. EV
13 Ben: Well I don’t know, I think you know it just
worked out right EV
15 Louis: Well, but I tell you, EV
16 I’ve got to tell you, EV
17 I have a great deal of respect for the previous
generations, about the previous generations of
19 Italians, EV
because I’m Italian, I am sure the Irish can say
the same thing for the Irish, and the blacks can
say the same thing,

but, the Italians you know in this country,
given the short time that they had and the, biases
that they confronted,

Ben: Right.

The two fragments present what I have called ‘heritage stories’, that is, narratives dealing with past experiences of the previous generations as a source for interpretation and discussion of the role of Italian immigrants in America. These narratives also occurred during the ‘socialization phase’ of the *Briscola* nights. It is interesting to notice that they are the narrative equivalent of conversational talk about parents and grandparents, which was common among the *Briscolani*. Members often made reference to what parents or grandparents said or did in the past to comment on present experience. For example, they described wine making, cooking, or card playing at their grandparents’ house as a way of emphasizing their respect for traditions. This interactional work about origins is important to understand the heritage narratives to which now we turn our attention again.

Example (3) is the transcript of a conversation that took place during dinner between three US-born members. The main speakers are Tony and Sean. Lines 1 to 3 correspond to a parallel conversation going on at the table that is the only one audible on the tape, so it is not clear what Tony and Sean were saying before the transcript starts, but in lines 4 and 5 and 7–9, Tony is stating that Italian immigrants greatly contributed to US society and Sean is expressing agreement with him (lines 6 and 9). In the following lines they co-construct a narrative account of what life was like for those immigrants. Notice that the focus is on hard work and difficult life conditions. In fact, the word that gets repeated most frequently between line 10 and line 25 is the word ‘work’, often in conjunction with expressions like ‘hard’ or ‘all day’. Both Tony and Sean are conveying images of their grandparents realizing hard physical labor in order to come out of poverty. The speakers make clear reference to the concrete case of their grandparents (lines 13, 14, 18, 19), but they also generalize their experience. In lines 21–28 they co-construct a past scenario in which Italian immigrants who arrived were unable to speak the language and had to confront many difficulties in order to make progress. Tony makes the point that it was hard to be able to study and then, starting on line 29, he inserts a narrative about how his father managed to go to medical school. He tells of how his grandfather’s economic conditions pushed
him to limit the number of children that were sent to school (lines 30–34) and underlines how the whole family collaborated in order to help his father get through medical school (lines 35 and 36) and start his professional life (lines 37–42). He uses enumeration and a listing intonation to give the sense of how his father’s education was a result of the involvement of the whole family. His evaluation focuses, in fact, on the role of the family in helping one another and on how giving this kind of support is a tradition for Italian families (lines 43–47). Thanks to its content and rhetorical organization, this narrative is successful in creating an image of first-generation Italian immigrants as hard working and focused on coming out of their poverty. This point also emerges in connection with preceding talk in which both participants developed these ideas.

Example (4) is very similar in terms of content and evaluation. The transcript starts with the beginning of the tape, so the talk preceding the narrative was not recorded. The conversation was, again, tape recorded during dinner and took place among Frank, Ben, Al, and Ryan, who are all US born, and Louis, who, although born in Italy, arrived in the United States at age 13. The conversation is focusing on families, and Ben and Al are competing for the floor to talk about their fathers (lines 2, 3). Ben gains the floor and starts a narrative about his father (line 4). The narrative is very simply built around his progress in 15 years from selling boots to becoming the owner of a ‘huge barber’ shop (lines 4–9). Interestingly, the evaluation of the narrative is provided by Louis (line 12), who recasts Ben’s father’s character in the traditional mould of the self-made man ‘with a vision’. Although Ben does not really endorse such an explanation (lines 13 and 14), Louis uses it to launch his own story-triggered evaluation of Italian immigrants as people who deserve admiration because they pursued their dreams notwithstanding the discrimination that they suffered (lines 15–25).

Going back to our examination of contextual factors that seem relevant to the narratives under analysis, we find that what was observed for the case of the first set of narratives holds for this set as well: in terms of identity, narrators are either US born, or came to the United States when they were very young. In terms of activity in which narratives are embedded, these narratives, like travel accounts, are inserted within dinner conversations. In terms of structure: again, narratives do not center around events, either because they have some action but no real complicating event, or because they have little action and are mostly descriptive of attitudes and habits. If we look at the narrative in Example (3) (lines 24–35), there is no complicating event per se. Rather, we can say that there is a ‘complicating condition’ (the grandfather could not afford sending all his children to school) and then a series of actions that indicate
how the family helped the only brother who went to medical school. In other words, the story is tellable not so much because of the occurrence of unexpected events, but mostly for its moral implications. Something similar can be said of the narrative told by Ben in Example (4) where, again, there is no real complicating event, just a list of actions that exemplify how progress was made through hard work.

A comparison of the two sets of narratives shows that in both cases the main point is not the recounting of unusual events, and therefore that these narratives are not told to entertain or to present past events as the main focus, but rather that they are told within and as part of explanation and reflection. The focus on explanation in the two sets of narratives is Italy and Italian heritage, specifically: images of Sicily and the role of past generations in America.4 The importance of explanation is reflected in the structure that we have discussed, including lack of complicating events (a characteristic that according to van Dijk 1993 is typical of argumentative narratives as well), focus on description of states, and strong embeddedness in surrounding talk. We have seen that these characteristics relate to the roles played by individuals in the local context. Both travel-related narratives and family-related narratives are embedded in sociability talk and are used by narrators to emphasize their Italian heritage and connections. They help Circolo members demonstrate that they have ties and contacts with Italy and at the same time allow them to position themselves with respect to current discourses about Italy or Italians. In particular, travel-related accounts allow narrators to probe and discuss what they know about Italy and how they relate to the country, to show that they still have family in Italy or/and that they are willing to explore these connections. Heritage narratives constitute arenas for individuals to display their ties with their Italian families and their attachments to family values. As mentioned, the identities of the men who tell these kinds of narratives in the data are very relevant because narrators are either US-born members or Italian-born members who, having immigrated when they were young, have spent most of their life in the host country. Italian-born members who have come to the United States at later stages do not engage in this kind of storytelling, which is a significant indication of the fact that their Italian identity is not a focus of attention as much as it is for players who were either born in the United States or came to the United States at a young age. In this sense, the analysis confirms the importance of narrative activity in the maintenance and/or transformation of roles at the interactional level. By telling stories on Italy and engaging in reflections on their past and present ties with the country of origin, US-born members or ‘more Americanized’ members are able to claim and underline their status as legitimate members of the club.
But why are Italian origin and Italian ties such a focus of attention for the Circolo’s members given that the club is a card-playing organization? It is true that, ostensibly, the Circolo was founded as a space where people could play Briscola and that its declared objective is to provide players in the area with the opportunity of exercising their skills. However, the president and Circolo members also strongly underline ‘Italiannes’ as a fundamental aspect of the Circolo’s identity. The importance of such identity is manifested in many of the club’s practices (for a detailed discussion of the relationships between these practices and Italian identity, see De Fina 2007a and 2007b). These include linguistic practices such as code switching from English into Italian, socialization practices, and other types of symbolic practices such as the use of the colors of the Italian flag in printed materials, badges, and other gadgets, the choice of Italian restaurants or schools for the meetings, the preparation and consumption of typical Italian food. The fact that Briscola is an Italian game and that membership involves Italian origins is continuously underlined through these practices and also within speeches and writings by members or sponsors. Just to give one example of an explicit reference to the Italian origin and inspiration of the club, I quote below a fragment taken from a speech delivered by Father Franzini, the priest in charge of the local Italian Church (a place where Briscola tournaments are held once a year), to remember members of the club that recently passed away:

(5) Father Franzini (F)
1 F: I got to know both of them indirectly through the 
2    Briscola but also because of their families, they 
3    are such nice people. I want you to know don’t 
4    worry, they are not waiting for another two of 
5    you to go up there ((laughter)). There are enough 
6    players up there to play. And the only thing is they 
7    don’t cheat, I hope you don’t, ((laughter)) just try 
8    your best, and actually they enjoyed life, I know 
9    that Jack really enjoyed life until the very end, his 
10   wife told me that he much looked forward to come and 
11   play Briscola not so much for the Briscola, but he said 
12   the companionship and this is the reason why I am so 
13   happy also looking at father Cesar, that is the reason why 
14   he built this place so it was for people like you so that 
15   you could come together and enjoy yourselves always 
16   with an Italian flavor so if you played Bridge 
17   I would say no only Briscola, only Tressette! 
   ((general laughter)) ((my underlining))
In the course of this speech, Father Franzini remembers the two Briscollani and their families (lines 1–3), jokes about them playing in heaven and not cheating (lines 3–8), and mentions one of them as an enthusiast of the game who enjoyed the good company and atmosphere of the club (lines 9–12). He then turns to a portrait of Father Cesar, the founder of the church, to remind members of his objective to create a place where people could gather and play ‘with an Italian flavor’ (lines 12–16) and jokes on the importance of playing Italian card games (line 17).

Father Frazini’s words show that Briscola is celebrated not per se, as a game, but as an Italian game and as a ritual of coming together for people of Italian origin. Thus, establishing and strengthening ties with Italy and Italian heritage is not only an individual endeavor, but also an important aspect of the collective identity that the Circolo members are trying to build and project. For this reason, storytelling centered on Italy contributes to the positioning of individuals as persons of Italian origin with ties to their country, but also to the construction and projection of a collective image of an Italian American community striving to revive traditional practices and values, and stressing a positive image of Italy and Italians.

To summarize: the analysis of the topic of narratives, their structural properties, their occurrence in specific moments within the more general frame of the Briscola nights and the identity of the narrators shows in what ways storytelling activity feeds upon and builds both individual and collective identities in the Circolo, but also participates in the realization of some of its objectives. In fact, defending and promoting an Italian American identity is a central part of the Circolo’s life. But given the historical weakness of Italian ethnicity in the United States, members of the club, like other Italian American organizations in the country, engage through their narratives and conversations in a more general process of reflection aimed at establishing the contents and merits of an Italian heritage that has been a burden, not an asset, in the past. It is in this process of reflection that takes place continuously within the Circolo, and of which storytelling is a significant part, that an important link between local and more macro social contexts can therefore be found.

4. Storytelling in the macro context

The social world is made up of institutions and social spaces in which individuals and groups come into economic and other kinds of social relationships. As Pierre Bourdieu (2002 [1977]: 179) underlined, the position of groups within the social world is given not only by their economic power, but by their cultural power, which in turn is determined by their
ability to acquire distinctions through the accumulation of ‘a capital of honour and prestige’. Such symbolic capital is assembled through symbolic practices, i.e., social practices that have to do with the maintenance of relationships, reciprocal bonds and allegiances. In that sense, as Bourdieu correctly emphasized, the social formations are never given, but they are renewed and modified through the concrete action and interaction of social agents, and power is not exclusively a matter of economic domination, but rather of economic and symbolic domination. The creation and imposition of new perceptions about a group, perceptions that may modify social relations and characteristics commonly associated with that group through history and habitus, are central to the acquisition of symbolic power and therefore to the securing of more prestigious positions in social space. This is why groups do not only struggle for economic power, but also for recognition.

Narrative activity is central among groups’ symbolic practices because it allows the renegotiation of social relations through reinterpretation of past and present experiences and affirmation of the moral values with which the group is associated. Through the construction of positive images of themselves, social groups can accumulate symbolic power and ultimately achieve changes in their position. This process, which is very important for all immigrant groups, is particularly significant for Italian Americans because, although as an ethnic community they have achieved a solid economic position, they still perceive themselves as lacking a positive identity. This is due to a peculiar immigration history that has strongly influenced Italian Americans’ public discourses and perceptions about themselves as an ethnic group and the current debates over their place in US society. Because of the space limitations of this paper, I can only allude to this peculiar history in order to illuminate the ‘symbolic struggles’ that Italian Americans conduct in the different social arenas in which they act as an ethnic entity.

According to scholars of Italian immigration to the United States (see, for example, Nelli 1983; Richards 1999) Italians were at the bottom of the social hierarchy in the period that goes from the end of the nineteenth century, when the first migration waves arrived, to the 1950s, when the immigrants started leaving the Little Italies. Italians were classified as ‘black’ and therefore they also became the object of relentless discrimination and racism. Stereotypical images of Italians associated them with lack of culture, Mafia, and violence. According to Richards (1999), Italian identity was formed within this climate of extreme racism and Italians tried to escape the possible consequences of discrimination by devoting themselves to hard physical labor. They also tried (like other immigrant groups in that era) to assimilate as much as they could, rejecting the use
of their language by their children, favoring a total Americanization of their families, and often intermarrying with members of other ethnic groups. Thus, in a few decades they were able to become part of a new middle class that, in the 1950s, left the Little Italies in favor of a more middle-class suburban type of life. However, the price that they paid for this quasi-total assimilation was that of a ‘withdrawal from public discourse’ which ‘privatized the issue of their identity, rendering their protesting voices and perspectives on Italian American identity unspoken and unspeakable’ (1999: 192).

This conflict about identity is still evident in the historical and ongoing debate among Italian American intellectual circles over whether there is such a thing as an Italian American identity. Intellectuals disagree on whether Italian ethnicity is in fact in its twilight (Alba 1985) and has been reduced to an entirely symbolic and peripheral phenomenon (Gans 1979), over whether Italians are white, black, or simply ‘European Americans’ (Vecoli 2000), and over whether they have a right to claim ethnicity or not. The debate involves every aspect of the Italian American experience, from literature and cinema to family and way of life. Italian Americans appear to struggle both to come out of their history of assimilation with a distinct identity, and to recover a sense of self that can shield them from overpowering stereotypical images associated with them, which are still very much alive, even when they coexist with positive images of stylishness and refinement. Scholars of Italian migration underline how this process of self-construction crucially involves a reflection and recovery of the experience of past generations. Richards (1999: 197; my emphasis), for example, claims that Italian Americans need to circulate,

A public discourse that makes clear both to others and to themselves the humane struggle of grandparents and parents under circumstances of injustice that were often concealed from them [. . .]. For each Italian American in particular, recovery of memory not only, consistent with ancient humane values, rightly honors earlier generations, but makes clear who one is and what one’s ethical options and responsibilities are and might be in contemporary circumstances.

Italian American communities all over the country engage in symbolic practices related to the recovery of tradition and the construction of positive images and perceptions about the immigrant past and present in different social fields through local and federal organizations. These practices are very much alive in the Circolo della Briscola as well. As I have discussed, the club’s practices always have a symbolic dimension in that they represent and foster a link between past and present and, through it, an acceptance of the ethnic origins as defined by those symbols. Among these practices, storytelling has a particularly important
role because it constitutes a locus for an open reflection and construction of experience. Unlike other cultural practices that often index identities indirectly through the use of symbols, the telling of narratives allows members of the Circolo to make sense of their past, their traditions, their ties to the country of origin through the representation of story worlds that configure social relations and actions in certain ways. Such representations constitute arenas for the discussion of social expectations, interpretations of present and past events, and moral values associated with ethnic solidarity.

5. Conclusions

The analysis presented here shows that placing storytelling practices in context implies looking for links among different levels of contextualization: from the local activity, to the more general event in which the activity is embedded, to relevant aspects of the social world. In the case presented here, I have shown that storytelling functions through specific interactional and structural mechanisms at an individual level to modify the position of members with respect to each other, at a collective level to implement a particular image of the club, and at a macro level as a symbolic practice through which members of the club negotiate and construct new perceptions about the social position and identity of the ethnic group to which they claim allegiance. The local narratives that develop around talk about origins, stereotypical images of Italy, and immigrant life share with other symbolic practices by other social groups identifying themselves as Italian Americans the objective of changing social perceptions about the ethnic group and finding new and positive identities for its members. In this light, narrative activity in the Circolo della Briscola does not merely construct and reflect the local context of the club, but also shapes and is shaped by the wider context of power relations between ethnically defined groups in US society.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

| CAPS | Louder than surrounding talk |
| .    | At the end of words marks falling intonation |
| ,    | At the end of words marks slight rising intonation |
| -    | Abrupt cutoff, stammering quality when hyphenating syllables of a word |
| !    | Animated tone, not necessarily an exclamation |
In using the term ‘activity’ here I follow Gaik (1992: 275–276), who characterizes an activity as defined by ‘different purposes and modes of interaction that require their own roles and modes of speaking’.

According to Carranza (1998: 288) low-narrativity narratives ‘may have some or most of the elements by which we recognize narratives, for example a reference to a sequence of past actions or a representation of a protagonist; however the events being recounted are not discreet or singular, but mutually overlapping or recurrent’.

See Stahl (1983: 270), quoted in Bauman (1986: 34): “Other-oriented narrators under-play their personal role in the story to emphasize the extraordinary nature of things that happen in the tale”, whereas “self oriented tellers delight in weaving fairly elaborate tales that build upon their self images and emphasize their own actions, either as human or exemplary”. Here narrators do not emphasize extraordinary events, but rather exemplary lives.

A region that is symbolically important to immigrants because many of them belong to Sicilian families, but also because of all its association with Mafia and organized crime.

Examples of racist behavior and discrimination against Italian immigrants are innumerable. Among them one can quote the 1924 Johnson–Reed Immigration Act, which imposed a system of quotas according to which only 150,000 immigrants could be admitted to the country. The system was based on country of origin. Italians were assigned a yearly quota of 3,845 (see Nelli 1983: 154). Also, in this period lynching of Italians was common practice as demonstrated by the infamous trial and subsequent electrocution of Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti.

For example, the National Italian American Foundation announces on its Web site that it ‘remains committed to fighting the negative and inaccurate depictions of Italian Americans while at the same time highlighting the positive images of Italian Americans and their numerous contributions to the United States’ (www.niaf.org/image_identity/default.asp; accessed on 18 June 2006). In addition, it provides tips to combat stereotyping.

References


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