Revisiting and revisioning silence and narrative in psychological anthropology

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Abstract

This chapter highlights the generativity of narrative analysis in a critical, engaged psychological anthropology. It argues that a more robust theoretical and methodological focus on narrative that includes silences is needed for further developing and applying a conceptualization of subjectivity as rich intersectional ensembles. Building on a powerful critical tradition in psychological anthropology that theorizes narrative as fundamentally shaping everyday interactions and ways in which people create and inhabit their worlds, the chapter theorizes silences as entangled within narratives, communicating and foreclosing what stories can be told, imagined, and enacted in particular contexts. Narrative, from this perspective, is not only a way to make meaning, but is embodied, political, and affective – a mode of interaction unfolding in human relationships through language, materiality, and affect. And silences, including those embodied and reproduced through histories of violence, are embedded in narrative interactions, and shape their horizons of possibility. Finally, while narratives, like silences, do not guarantee closure, it is precisely this lack of closure that makes a narrative perspective vital, both for understanding the complexity of people's moral being-in-the-world under conditions of structural inequality, and for imagining how worlds could be otherwise. A powerful and promising direction for a psychological anthropology that is visible and useful to the wider discipline and beyond therefore involves developing concepts and tools to study silence *and* narrative, and silence *in* narrative.

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A flash splits the night sky, followed by thunder rumbling. Rain pours down hard. It splatters on the pavement, barely seeping in and rolling down, joining the other drops, puddling in the caked mud by the road, soaking fallen leaves, nourishing the grass. Nearby, on the beach, hail pounds into the sand. It is absorbed in part, then makes small pools and mini rivulets as the grains shift, succumbing to the hard balls pelting it and melding with the waves reaching the shore. Expanding round ripples form and distort one another in the slow-moving river, a thousand mini-explosions pockmarking the surface as the hailstones, like tossed pebbles, undulate the water, whorling and whirling as the current flows. A wind howls. The rhythmic sound of rain and hail pattering on metal intensifies, while smells of the street, the beach, and the vegetation emanate, pungent in the heavy night air.

The paragraph above is not the setting of a story or an ethnographic scene, though it could be. We begin with this metaphoric image of rain and hail pelting and interacting with a range of themselves-dynamic, multi-sensorial surfaces to invite readers to engage in an imaginative act, to begin to fathom the work of narrative and silence, and their import for psychological anthropology. With this metaphor of shifting materialities with different elasticities coming into creative, yet often constrained contact with each other, we aim to unflatten the terrain of the field, and broaden conceptualizations of narrative and its inextricable partner, silence.

We think of narrative as including all expressions, utterances, and imaginings that shape people's lifeworlds, from the most elaborate and coherent stories – told, danced, painted, or dreamed – to the smallest, most fragmented, ambiguous gestures, images, or phrases through which individuals construct their temporal being, drawing on pasts while opening and foreclosing possible futures. Narrators may do so alone or together, but always already enmeshed in the

multiplicity of relations that shape their narrative possibilities and limits. Like the ripples that the hail forms in the water, and the ever-so-slight – or suddenly rapid – movement of the mud under the weight of the pouring rain, narrative acts reverberate in social worlds. They do so in uncertain and often unpredictable ways, within unequal playing fields that shape possibilities for reverberation, and in which some gestures or utterances resonate loudly, while others appear ephemerally, making tiny circles or none at all.

Like the ripples, too, narratives follow predictable structures that give way to new shapes, meanings, and imaginings as they come into contact with other ripples and objects cast in the water or jutting from the ground. In this sense, narrative is never fully closed, even as narrators may strive for clear beginnings and endings with clear resolutions of events (Ochs and Capps 2001). Rather, narrative is creative, performative, and inseparable from silence, which punctuates and contours narrative acts, much like the objects jutting from the ground and stopping the hail's ripples from moving further through the water. This is because language itself does not simply refer to things out there in the world, but actually shapes and creates our experiences in the process of being used in interaction with ourselves ('in our minds') and with others in the social world (Ochs 2012).

In short, narrative need not be linear, closed and definitive. Not infrequently, it is open and uncertain, filled with unarticulated possibilities. To grasp these qualities of narrative as open and nonlinear and the implications that follow, we need to pay attention to silences as part of narratives. Silences include things not said, sometimes willfully, perhaps to imply and connote without full articulation; other times because experience may exceed communicative means, or because circumstances forbid and even foreclose articulation (see Weller 2017; 2021). Silences, like words, do things in the world: they can be ambiguous or quite clear, forced as well as chosen. Silences forge spaces of uncertainty as well as forms of refusal and possible resistance; they can serve as gestures of care or, sometimes simultaneously, they can be painful and index forms of unspeakable suffering. In and as narratives, silences point to

excesses and remainders, to opacity, mystery, and the limits of knowledge. Silences can be as intriguing and telling, perhaps, as are the stories in which they are embedded or around which they circulate.

As psychological anthropologists, we are interested in the unfolding or condensed interrelation between the internal and social worlds of individuals within their historical (and inextricably political) context – what we call subjectivity. We use narrative analysis as an essential way through which to understand subjectivity, since narrative shapes so much of our mediated existence, organizing the chaos of our perceptional world into units of meaning, where we connect events through attributions of causes and motives. Including silences as part of this analysis, we suggest, enables psychological anthropologists to foreground how structural inequalities become embedded in human relations and how individuals creatively work through and affect these relations in their everyday lives.

In the sections that follow, we highlight two key ways in which a perspective that focuses on silence as part of narrative offers fruitful new directions for psychological anthropology. In the next section, we begin with “uncertainty” as a central feature of human existence, crucial for understanding subjectivity. Here, we argue that narrative, including its silences, helps people grapple with the ambivalence and open-endedness that constitute lived experience, particularly when facing adverse conditions such as serious illness, a terminal diagnosis, war, deportation, betrayal, and so on. Silences, we show by drawing on recent ethnographies, can signal the different kinds of uncertainty that people struggle with and how they respond to these uncertainties over time. We then argue (in the third section of this chapter) that silences in narrative not only are produced through but can be productive of political critiques of various kinds. By examining the ways that institutions, policies, and practices can silence and in other ways elide ways of being, anthropologists can both illuminate the workings of power in everyday life and point to possible productive sites of refusal and resistance. Here again, we see how

silence and narrative are not opposites, but generative in their interaction, to produce political critique.

Uncertainty

We opened this chapter with a narrative imagining of hail and rain, a metaphor for thinking with the creative, unfinished, and yet constrained ways in which narratives shape our world. With this image in mind, we grant that, quite often, narratives reinforce dominant discourses, such as stories of conquest by "winners" or specious accounts that naturalize and legitimize gender or race hierarchies. But narratives also critically dismantle such discourses by providing alternative, often subversive accounts, even if these sometimes remain only partially spoken and inadequately heard. It is this second, sometimes silenced and silence-filled, narrative mode that helps people navigate through (and at times revel in) uncertainty. For, as Jerome Bruner (1986) famously put it, narratives "traffic in possibilities" that involve musings about life's "what-if" and "not-yet" moments. As people grapple with minor or major trouble in situations of uncertainty, they rely on everyday narrative interactions that unfold through improvisations and which mobilize open-ended possibilities.

In what follows, we highlight how silences are not a mere residue of such efforts: they are crucial elements of these open-ended narrative modes. We begin by discussing three ethnographies that show how narrative and silence are mobilized to confront uncertainty, as they attend to unspoken encounters, images at the limits of narrative, and narrative "dissolutions," respectively. We then discuss three additional ways of enriching these perspectives by applying a broader approach to silence as part of narrative, namely by exploring the frameworks of narrative dramas in interaction, subjunctivity, and sideshadowing.

Imaging Dissolutions

For much of psychological anthropology's history, scholars have alluded to silences in people's psychic and social worlds, but it is perhaps only recent ethnographies that have thematized silence more explicitly, finding that it offers insight into people's troubled and uncertainty-filled worlds. For example, Angela Garcia (2010; 2014) does so in her poignant and poetic account of addiction as a life domain characterized by deep uncertainty and melancholias that entwine historical dispossession with present, barely livable, conditions. Central in Garcia's documentation of a detox center in New Mexico catering to heroin-dependent Española Valley residents long dispossessed of their lands and livelihoods are her and their – often muted – experiences of mutual vulnerability and endurance. We read these experiences as a form of narrative enacted largely in, with, and through silence.

For example, reflecting on a night in which she sat with a resident undergoing withdrawal symptoms, the two ensconced in a blackout, Garcia writes about the impossibility of understanding the nature of his pain and how he "allowed [her] – perhaps even needed [her] – to be by his side" (2010, 68). Garcia neither explicitly names this interaction as silence nor calls it a narrative. Yet in weaving this and similar unspoken encounters into her depiction of their common struggle with uncertainty, her ethnography calls attention to the crucial role that instances of sitting together in silence, for example contemplating unspeakable pain, play in creating a shared narrative, however partial. Throughout her ethnography, Garcia highlights the power of silence when words appear to fail protagonists, and the importance of reading between the lines and of leaving things open-ended, contradictory, and unresolved. Garcia's attention to spoken and less articulated contradictions leads her to question public normativities that criminalize and individualize "addict behavior" as inherently immoral and antisocial. Instead, she shows how kin and friends may cement their bonds and commitments to one another through the provisioning of drugs for and with each other.

In a similar settler colonial context, Lisa Stevenson in *Life Beside Itself* (2014) critically analyzes how the Canadian government has for decades couched its efforts to keep Inuit people alive as benevolent care while Inuit experience these as murderous, "anonymous care." She shows how the government is indifferent and even hostile to the lives of specific Inuit individuals and only considers them as a problematic population. Exploring these tense, contradictory dynamics as they figure in archival documents, oral histories, and Inuit dreams, memories, and haunting loss, Stevenson suggests that the government's mission to "civilize" Inuit people while silently expecting them to "fail" is part of what she calls the "psychic life of biopolitics." As an alternative to the government's "discursive modes of knowing" and to question public normative understandings of life's worth, she offers "images." Thinking with images, she shows, helps Inuit individuals – and ethnographers – allude to uncertainties that remain inchoate or less than fully articulated.

To this end, Stevenson begins her enthralling ethnography with an account of a young boy, Paul, who told her of his best friend who died in a snowmobile accident. Later, reflecting on what happens after death, Paul recalls his sister saying that their dead uncle came back as a raven, living behind their house. Asked if his sister still thinks so, Paul replies that he doesn't know, but that the raven is still there. Stevenson suggests that as anthropologists, we can approach sometimes hopeful uncertainty–as in Paul's story of the raven–by attending to "the images through which we think and live" (2014, 10). Images, in this sense, may be visual, but also sonic or verbal:

> Images – in the broad sense that I use the term – are useful precisely because they can capture uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it. (The raven is still there, whether or not it is the dead uncle.) I hope that drawing our anthropological attention back to imagistic rather than discursive modes of

> knowing allows us to be faithful to a whole range of contradictory experiences that have often gone unthought in ethnography. (Stevenson 2014, 10)

In short, Stevenson suggests that images resist formulation and contrast with assertions, facts, and discursive ways of knowing that fit predetermined categories that prevent anthropologists from considering contradictory experiences and alternative ways of being.

Alternatively, we suggest that discursive – narrative – ways of knowing cover this same wide range of possibilities: from formulations, facts and expressions that leave little room for doubt, to silences, ambiguities, and contradictory experiences that resist linearity and closure. Narratives, like Stevenson's images, are often full of unresolved contradictions, allowing people to navigate through and revel in uncertainty. Rather than thinking of images as outside of narratives, we suggest that these are intimately related and mutually constituting. Indeed, as we show below, narrative analysis that attends to subjects' unfolding, often meandering and affect-laden (or seemingly barren) stories is a crucial method to do what Stevenson (2014, 2) calls "[f]ieldwork in uncertainty," which is "less about collecting facts than about paying attention to the moments when the facts falter."

Sarah Pinto, among other psychological anthropologists writing of mental health struggles, has also been particularly attentive to such moments when the facts falter. Across her ethnographies, Pinto shows that north Indian divorced women institutionalized for "madness" for the dissolution of their marriages (in *Daughters of Parvati,* 2014), as well as bereaved rural women who are left no space to mourn their infants in India's context of intensive family planning efforts (in *Where There Is No Midwife,* 2008), are ill-served and fall between the cracks of developmentalist narratives of progress and benevolent care. Unilinear and univocal stories that hold together, she argues, prove impossible for the women, their families, clinicians, or the ethnographer herself. Taking an ethical stance of "dissolution," or a refusal to impose closure and normativity on events, Pinto illuminates how the multilayered experiences of women's

mental illness in India do not fit any pre-set (diagnostic) categories, escaping a narrative rendering that would resolve their stories into singular truths. Anthropologists, she suggests, need not create coherent narratives where there are none, since "[s]ome circumstances might call less for an effort to 'tell the whole story' than the creation of gaps, breaks, and absences" (Pinto 2014, 260). Like Garcia and Stevenson, Pinto thereby draws attention to the power and, indeed, necessity of creating space for silences that resist resolution and the reduction of people and events to pre-made categories.

Foregrounding Silence in Narrative

If Pinto's account focuses on situations of *crisis*, with women's psychiatric treatment causing a "crisis in narration," we suggest that the silences and ambiguities that she so subtly yet powerfully touches on signal a mode of uncertainty that is also pervasive in subjects' narrative grappling with the world in *everyday* life. Rather than thinking of these silences as the "dissolution of narrative," which presumes that narrative acts strive only towards straightforward truths, we think of narrative as always already infused by silences, and "dissolution" itself as a pervasive narrative mode. This is because narratives can have multiple logics, from the most linear ones that canalize toward one teleological end, to those that are open-ended, meandering, multivocal, and as such, potentially filled with contradiction, incommensurability, and uncertainty. We think of the former, linear narratives as involving "foreshadowing" and "backshadowing" logics.

Foreshadowing logics characterize those narratives in which past events foreshadow and are assumed to inevitably lead to events to come. Backshadowing logics use this same linearity in reverse and characterize narratives governed by such moralizing principles and statements as "should have known" or "should have seen the writing on the wall." These are accounts where present events and circumstances are thought to have inevitably emerged from

past circumstances that are *now* assumed to have been known and knowable, but were not yet so certain at the time they took place or were embarked on.[1] In what follows, we present three relatively recent approaches that psychological anthropologists have used to grapple with and foreground those non-linear narratives where silences and dissolutions prevail, particularly in contexts of uncertainty. We call these *narrative dramas in interaction, subjunctivity,* and *sideshadowing*, and we explain their mutual import in turn.

Narrative Dramas

We begin with examples from Cheryl Mattingly's work on narrative dramas, which are narratives enacted in the course of ongoing interaction, rather than told after the fact. The goals and effects of these dramas often remain unspoken, but as Mattingly (1998; 2010; 2014) elucidates, they can be powerful vehicles for dealing with situations of intense uncertainty. In following severely and chronically ill children and their families in Los Angeles, Mattingly might well have focused on crises of health and narration. Instead, she shows that it is also (and sometimes especially) in children's, families', and clinicians' fleeting, seemingly insignificant interactions that new experiential worlds are made (or snuffed nearly out of existence), narratively prefigured through words or gestures that index, as well as construct, emergent possible actions and modes of feeling and being.

Therapists do not always plan out such interactions, nor necessarily can they fathom or articulate their significance. They may think of themselves as "just socializing" or "just" getting a child to engage in particular therapeutic modalities, such as playing with putty to develop fine motor skills (Mattingly 2010, 210, 152, 161). Yet in entering a child's pretend world, therapists collaboratively foster with children and their families uncertain "practices of hope" that shepherd them in potentially "transformative journeys'' to embrace not only the challenge at hand (climb a

[1] For more on foreshadowing, backshadowing, and sideshadowing (discussed below), see Bernstein 1994; Morson 1994; Ochs and Capps 2001; Shohet 2017, 2018, 2021.

stair, use one's left hand), but wider-horizoned and longer-term vistas of persisting in life despite disabilities and structural forces that continually constrain and threaten defeat. Comprehending the potentialities and effects of such dramas requires more than just attending to words. As Mattingly shows, it requires that the ethnographer attend to the emergent possibilities that may remain silent and perhaps invisible to the actors involved.

To convey the importance of close observation and attunement to the hidden story that unfolds in the course of narrative interaction, we present the following example in minute, even painstaking detail. In this example, an occupational therapist interacts with a severely ill child, Belinda, who is suffering from a malignant brain tumor. In *The Paradox of Hope* (2010) and *Moral Laboratories* (2014), Mattingly narrates the struggles for healing that four-year-old Belinda and her mother Andrena undertake in a social system where they continuously face racism and class-based exclusion. At the time of the encounter with the occupational therapist that Mattingly observed, Belinda and her mother have suffered a range of losses: Belinda is physically and cognitively impaired and uncooperative, far from the playful and active child she used to be. Yet, therapist Theresa manages to get Belinda interested in playing with putty. While the medical goal may be to increase the strength of Belinda's left hand, Mattingly shows that the narrative drama that unfolds in the therapeutic encounter has more far-reaching consequences. Theresa and Belinda first "bake cookies," then smash them, and then Belinda starts making "dinosaur stew." A small but significant part of their interaction unfolds as follows (Mattingly 2010, 160-161):

> *Theresa:* You need an apron when you cook. Are you cooking dinosaur? How are you going to prepare it? Bake it? Or fry it? (*Belinda continues to stir the putty, saying nothing*) What does it taste like?
>
> *Belinda*: It bites.
>
> *Theresa*: But what does it taste like?

Belinda: Like an orange.

Theresa: (*puzzled*) Like an orange. Oh.

Theresa tries to show her how to use both hands to push the dinosaur into the putty, as part of cooking it.

Belinda: (*brushing Theresa away, she suddenly plucks the dinosaur out of the stew, bringing him close to her face*) Okay (*she tells him sternly*). Now, you eat it.

Theresa: Oh, I see. You're baking *for* the dinosaur.

As Mattingly explains, the therapist here recognizes her mistake in thinking that Belinda wanted to pretend-cook and -eat the dinosaur, when she says, "Oh, I see. You're baking *for* the dinosaur," and then proceeds to agree with Belinda that the dinosaur is indeed very hungry. The "therapist's capacity for *surprise* and redirection," Mattingly argues, "is essential to the way this session approaches possibilities for transformation rather than closing them off" (2010, 162). These possibilities go far beyond the training of Belinda's left hand. In enacting a drama, including all its unexpected turns, Belinda re-becomes the delightful child she used to be, momentarily playing as if she weren't so terribly sick. Significantly, this allows her to retrieve agency, to create her own story, with a plot that she likes. Even if the therapist is not aware of the larger implications, this co-created narrative—watched with delight from the corner of the room by Belinda's mother Andrena and the ethnographer—helps shape a hopeful plot that Andrena tries to nurture against all the setbacks that they have experienced. It is a hopeful narrative of future recovery in the midst of terrifying uncertainty and the bleak prospect of Belinda's death (164-165).

Like most of the dramatic play in their encounter, this powerful layer of the narrative interaction between Belinda and Theresa remains unspoken: it is enacted rather than told. Here,

"hope" does not necessarily spring from "encouraging words," and narrative is shown to be less about semantic content or coherent plotlines than the dialogic and collaborative, embodied action of children, clinicians, and families engaged in routine hospital (and home) interactions. To reiterate, silence in narratives is not the complete absence of words but can be those gaps that make space for unspoken stories to emerge; and as Mattingly beautifully shows, these enable everyday interactions to become significant narrative enactments that need not call explicit attention to their (un/intended and sometimes under-recognized) salutary effects. Such productive silences, often in the form of everyday mini-dramas, foster narrative open-endedness at times when people are struggling with intense uncertainty about what the future will look like for them and what kind of life they might find worth living and struggling for, even in the most constrained and seemingly hopeless circumstances.

Subjunctivity: The "What ifs"

In our own work, we build on Mattingly's approach to narrative dramas in and as interaction, as well as on Pinto's notion of narrative dissolutions and Lisa Stevenson's call to "capture uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it" (2014, 11), by foregrounding and theorizing "subjunctive" and "sideshadowing" narratives. As elaborated by Jerome Bruner (1986, 1990), Byron and Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good (1994), and Cheryl Mattingly (2014), people use the subjunctive mode in narrative praxis to explore the possibilities of future trajectories or past causes. Instead of thinking through one linear and determined plot, subjunctivity allows people to ponder various "what if" scenarios, or even leave space for the possibility that something unexpected and as yet unspeakable or even unthinkable – such as divine intervention – may occur. As it fosters the multiplicity of possible futures and pasts, the subjunctive mode of narrative helps people to face situations of uncertainty in which there is no straightforward narrative plot at hand, such as in experiences of serious illness or when facing trouble in intimate relationships. Crucially, while sometimes people think through possible

scenarios in detail, often they leave possibilities partly unthought or unspoken, for example trailing off with a “we’ll see later” or “I don’t want to think about that yet.” Silence therefore plays an important role in such subjunctive elements of narrative.

Working with the concept of subjunctivity to show how people experiencing serious illness and multiple moral demands might think through possible scenarios while also deliberately leaving some scenarios unspoken, for example, Samuels (2018) describes the case of Tabinda, a highly educated and pious HIV-positive Indonesian woman who has fallen into poverty and who struggles with the conflicting needs of taking care of her health and taking care of her marriage. Reflecting on the past, Tabinda’s accounts point to her ex-husband’s dalliances as the source of her infection; yet Tabinda remains ambivalent about whether her husband was in fact the source. As well, she narrates her fall into abject poverty upon joining her new husband (after her first husband’s death from AIDS) as at once problematic and potentially redemptive.

Refusing the closure of morally consistent plots, Tabinda instead nurtures subjunctive elements in her story to leave both the past and possible future trajectories open and uncertain, ultimately “in the hands of God,” a figure who demands faith but is mysterious in response. As her husband demands that she stay home to take care of his children, even as health care workers insist that she pursue a medical trajectory that would take her away from home for significant stretches of time, Tabinda struggles with the possible consequences of either decision. Faced with this situation, she refuses to fully think through both “what if” scenarios, and rather keeps juggling the contradictory ethical demands of marriage and health as much as possible while hoping for an unexpected divine intervention. Similarly, despite her worsening condition, Tabinda comes to question whether she even has HIV and yet she continues to take medications while also reading her symptoms as signs from God.

As Samuels shows, Tabinda’s unfolding, subjunctive narratives about her past, present, and future cultivate contradiction, indeterminacy, and unknowability, working like Paul’s

statement in Stevenson's *Life Beside Itself* (2014), "I don't know, but the raven is still there." Tabinda traffics in subjunctive narratives less to make meaning of her life or find closure, than to navigate multiple relationships with contradictory ethical commitments. Leaving some scenarios and possibilities unspoken is critical to her effort of living through the intense uncertainty about her future amidst the structural forces that overdetermine her limited possibilities in life.

Sideshadowing: Ambiguity, Ambivalence, and Counter-Hegemonic Allusions

Related to subjunctivity is sideshadowing, which is another mode of narrative through which to confront and engage with uncertainty and multiple, conflicting relationships and ethical commitments. In contrast with foreshadowing and backshadowing narratives that privilege linearity and coherence, framing events as inevitably flowing one from the other, sideshadowing narratives instead centrally feature contingency, ambiguity, and contradiction, by foregrounding the doubt, uncertainty, and ambivalence of people's lived experience. Sideshadowing logics typically emerge in narratives that take place in interaction, as we highlighted with Cheryl Mattingly's work. They can often sound like the "narrative dissolutions" and "images at the limits of narrative" that Sarah Pinto and Lisa Stevenson, respectively, encourage anthropologists to embrace. Here, narrators and actors may not know how events will unfold; they entertain multiple possible futures that could yet materialize, as well as consider multiple possible pasts that might have happened and led to alternative outcomes than what they think did happen. Such narratives unsettle not only the future, but also the present and past.

As with our image of the rain splattering and barely seeping in, droplets joining and puddling into the caked mud, shifting forms, expanding and contracting, sideshadowing is a mode of narration in which narrators refuse to settle on one causal or temporal unfolding of events and instead allow them to shift and change as they speak. Through sideshadowing, narrators may resist closure and instead voice counter-hegemonic accounts that might remain otherwise silenced and occluded, and offer muted, alternative interpretations of present

conditions. Sideshadowing thus is a concept that expands on subjunctivity, as it is concerned with more than temporality and resultant possible trajectories (un)available for people to consider. Sideshadowing involves the articulation of alternative, sometimes only muted or whispered possibilities that contradict more dominant ones, as people narrate n-possibilities without attempting to resolve the contradictions, incongruencies, and incommensurabilities among them. Identifying such narrative occurrences, Shohet (2018; 2021) has suggested, can help psychological anthropologists "see" or "hear" the silences that pervade situations in which actors find themselves confronting, and sometimes embracing uncertainty and aporias, or when they resist or refuse to be boxed in by teleological interpretations of their lived experiences.

For example, writing of a family confronting illness and the nearness of death, as well as the remnants of past conflicts that arose in the wake of Vietnam's wars, Shohet (2021) relates a story told by her Vietnamese friend An and An's elderly mother Bi, just after they had all together visited Bi's eldest brother (Ông) and his comatose wife (Bà Bảy). Across multiple other interactions, the family, including An and Bi, had upheld Ông and Bà Bảy as virtuous members who actively contributed to the family's ability to harmoniously live together, taking care of younger members over decades of war, poverty, and hardships. Yet, using what Shohet identifies as "sideshadowing," An and her mother voice an alternative, muted account that, in the course of telling the dominant tale, also contradictorily indicts the elders. An and Bi thereby suggest that Ông and Bà Bảy's present suffering may be punishment for past and present wrongs.

Following the circuitous, loosely connected story rife with An's and Bi's at times conflicting emotions and recollections, Shohet tracks how grievances bubble below the surface of smooth family relations. Meanwhile silences – maintained through multifarious everyday efforts, such as leaving things unsaid but logically implied – crack only fleetingly, and in those moments cast a shadow on the side of the figure of an amicable family living in a morally just and unified Vietnam. Shohet points to how An's narration counters the more dominant family

narrative in which Bi's brother and wife are portrayed as virtuous caretakers who successfully navigated conflict with the Americans and with what was then North Vietnam, by sustaining their kin throughout and after Vietnam's wars. Instead, An recounts in a nonlinear, allusive fashion how decades earlier the couple aligned with the winning north Vietnamese communist regime but silently betrayed Ông's youngest brother, as they refrained from helping or visiting him when he was sent to a punitive reeducation camp for having been part of the Southern police forces, on Vietnam's American-allied losing side.

Listening to the gaps and unvoiced but implied connections, Shohet traces An's sideshadowing narrative logic, where she holds up her mother Bi, who unlike her eldest brother, kept caring for their youngest brother, despite his designation as a traitorous state enemy whom she had harbored during the war. Attending to how interlocutors narrate events, often in non-linear sequence allows us to glimpse unsanctioned emotions, such as when An and Bi, toward the end of the interaction, return to the recent past, angrily confiding how the eldest brother mishandled the family inheritance. His current suffering (witnessing and caring for his comatose wife), they imply, but again do not fully say, might be karmic (moral) retribution for past wrongs. An's sorrow and anger, Shohet further suggests, are a muted, but not fully silenced thread that courses through her narration, which we might "hear" by reading between the lines and attending to silences and omissions in her narrative. We see this, for example, when An at once aligns with state-promoted tropes of Vietnam's enduring "happy family," as if impervious to national and geopolitical fissures, *and* recalls home as a site of conflict, telling a story of family divisions in which the moral 'good' is contested. And yet none of the anger and discord are apparent during previous or subsequent visits and family feasts, where An and Bi express only care and respect, keeping up the idealized trope of harmonious family relations not haunted by national rifts.

As becomes evident in Shohet's (2021) ethnography, sideshadowing narratives loop and zigzag through time, embracing uncertainty, ambiguity, and ambivalence, which enables

narrators to grapple with the contingencies and moral tensions of everyday life. Such stories can weave through and disrupt backshadowing and foreshadowing narratives that reinforce public normativities and declarations, as personal sideshadowing narratives authorize subjects to explore possibilities and ethical commitments without settling on one unified and consistent plotline or moral stance. Together with subjunctivity and narrative dramas in interaction, sideshadowing is an analytic tool that helps us hear silences in narratives and see their key role in people's lives, particularly when confronting uncertainty.

Sideshadowing, subjunctivity, and narrative dramas in interaction flow from and enrich an approach that rejects a narrow view of life (or stories) as closed and transparent "texts" and instead attends to the performative qualities of narrative, to its capacity to forge emergent dramas that may open otherwise modes of being and alternate possible worlds. Narratives as imaginative and performative acts may thereby do the work of "dissolution" and countenance the uncertainty of *undoing* — creating what Lisa Stevenson calls "images" — that question dominant and foreclosed truths. As Cheryl Mattingly (2010, 45) puts it, "[t]he task is how to consider the structural not only as large cultural and historical narratives that shape everyday interaction but also from a dramatistic perspective that subverts a portrait of them as totalizing narrative frames." This encompassing view of narrative — as not only a totalizing discursive framework, but one including silences and the meandering, surprising, creative, subjunctive and unresolved narrative work in the everyday — offers tremendous potential for a critical psychological anthropology that engages with the ways in which structural inequalities are lived, reworked, fought against, or silenced, as we show in the next section.

Political Critique

As a field (in)famous for its early formulations of intercultural "personality" differences (e.g., Benedict 1934; 1946; Mead 1928; 1930) and arguably overly cognitivist biases to the exclusion

of embodied experience, psychological anthropology's attention to *intra*cultural variation and disruption of totalizing views of (political) subjectivity and possibilities for (constrained) action have perhaps been unduly overlooked. Approaches including person-centered ethnography and critical phenomenology, however, have redirected psychological anthropologists' attention in productive ways. Some of these include examining how persons', families', and communities' struggles reflect and rework histories of colonial violence and dispossession, and delineating the various ways in which subjects draw on cultural resources to confront past, present, and imagined future struggles.[2] These approaches trouble received understandings of care and benevolence, freedom and responsibility, violence and abandonment, and other such presumed "goods" or "evils," and align with sociocultural anthropologists' broader interest in critically examining contemporary and past power relations and political formations.

In what follows, we highlight four recent ethnographies whose phenomenological approaches to lived experience reveal the workings of power. They do this in two ways: first, they elucidate how media discourses and public and private institutions such as state organs, aid organizations, and insurance companies shape and constrain the particular spaces for narratives to ripple through and be heard or silenced. Second, they show how silences can also become strategic spaces of political critique, as people subtly resist the hegemonic institutional narratives into which they are interpellated and often coopted. As we elaborate below, we read these ethnographies as engaging silence in narrative to illuminate processes of refusal and resistance, in Audra Simpson's (2007) terms.

One (Willen 2019) focuses on how unauthorized global migrants confront state violence with strategies of silence and invisibility, while still carving out "inhabitable spaces of welcome" (18). The three other ethnographies (Giordano 2014; Lester 2019; Varma 2020), like Sarah

[2] For a selection of such works, see, e.g. Abu-Lughod 2008; Buch Segal 2016; Gammeltoft 2014; Garcia 2010; Garro 2003; Good et al. 2008; Hollan 2000; Pinto 2014; Reyes-Foster 2018; Stevenson 2014; Throop 2010; Willen 2019, among many others.

Pinto's (2014) work, examine how mental health workers struggle to offer succor to patients within local, national, and international contexts of violence and inequality.[3] Institutional care, these studies show, is all too often experienced as carceral, and patients' unbearable life conditions are psychologized, medicalized, and framed as individual mental health problems. Extending beyond earlier arguments that medicine needs rehumanizing through ethnographic attunements between clinicians and their patients, these works show, in Saiba Varma's (2020, 9) terms, how cases present not simply as stories of "violence *in* medicine," but "violence *through* medicine," where humanitarianism and militarism (or neoliberalism, or assimilationism in other contexts) are entangled and even merge. Across a variety of contexts, we see how patients' symptoms persist and are even exacerbated despite, and perhaps even because of access to care, acting as "biomoral" critiques of the institutional and political-economic relations and dominant narratives of illness and normality in each setting. Importantly, such critiques are produced through and indexed by key silences in narratives, as featured in the four ethnographies to which we now turn.

Acknowledgement and the Politics of Hearing

In her incisive ethnography of ethnopsychiatry and migrants' mental health in Italy, Cristiana Giordano (2014) critiques institutional settings such as police stations, Catholic-run rehabilitations services, and biomedical psychiatric institutions that in practice demand clients to adopt and fit into their dominant frameworks in order to be deemed worthy of services offered. Migrants' distress, Giordano shows, cannot be reduced to individual breakdown or disorder, and eruptions read by state organs as pathological behavior instead point to global inequities that continue to leave some with no choice but to flee to the lands of former colonizers and

[3] We are aware of the controversy surrounding Saiba Varma's (2020) ethnography, and the silences that she and others engaged in. For a thoughtful reflection on the questions that this controversy raises about ethnographic practices and silences beyond those theorized in *The Occupied Clinic,* see Fazili (2022).

aggressors in search of a better life. Giordano proposes to think about politics through the concept of “acknowledgement.” She argues that while “recognition” demands the other to make herself known through established categories and narratives (such as those of the “human-trafficking victim”), a politics based on acknowledgement would not require “knowing the other” (i.e., translating them into preconceived categories), but would allow for differences to remain that cannot be fully known or articulated and that may disrupt hegemonic categories and discourses.

The potential for theorizing such possibilities of “acknowledgement” from a narrative perspective is beautifully illustrated in Giordano’s analysis of the story–or rather, multiple stories–of a young woman called Grace. Grace traveled from Nigeria to Italy, probably as a minor. Accompanied by Giordano, she tells the police, and later psychiatrists and others, how she got entangled in sex work and experienced severe sexual and psychological violence before she entered the rehabilitation program for “victims of human trafficking” that she was in when Giordano met her (Giordano 2014, 50).

Grace experiences severe mental distress. Over time, and in what we would call “sideshadowing” mode, she tells multiple different and conflicting stories that keep eluding the coherent narrative of the “victim” that rehabilitation services expect her to identify with. Giordano proposes that rather than understanding Grace’s multiple, conflicting stories to mean that her “true” narrative has somehow been missed, the many contradictions and silences as well as her suffering are an “account in and of itself, a way of telling an ineffable story in institutional settings that represent, to her, multiple alterities and that inhibit the production of a single narrative” (2014, 55). As acts of “acknowledgement” that refuse reduction and assimilation into received categories and normativities, silences can create space for those who do not readily fit in, or who come with residues and remainders that exceed and cannot be contained by dominant forms of knowledge.

An anthropological analysis of narrative and silence, then, has the potential to open up what Saiba Varma (2020, 31), drawing on Lawrence Cohen, calls "a different politics of hearing." Writing about Kashmiri stories of madness and disturbance, Varma notes how their widespread complaints of *kamzorī* – often understood as a persistent fatigue or loss of energy – could not be acknowledged, recognized, or addressed by humanitarians and psychiatrists, as these complaints did not fit with biomedical diagnostic criteria based on an individual, bounded sufferer and her individual past trauma. Rather, Varma shows, *kamzorī* is embedded and embodied in a long historical consciousness of violence and colonization. Its symptoms cannot be reduced to the psychological and physical. Listening to stories of *kamzorī* beyond biomedical discursive frameworks in which they are not "heard" even though they are not silent, and to the ways in which "people undid, redid, and aspired to new orders and ways of being," Varma (2020, 64) gestures toward the potentiality of a political otherwise. Addressing the politics of hearing, she argues, requires attention to "elliptic communication," to poetry, dreams, and other narrative expressions that defy totalizing discourses. Doing so demands that anthropologists move beyond mere listening or bearing witness, toward an ethically and politically engaged anthropology (197).

Further, Varma elucidates, an engaged anthropology (and psychiatry) cannot be reduced to simple slogans of solidarity or invocations of "community-based care." As she shows in the case of Mauna, who was subjected to multiple electroconvulsive shock therapy (ECT) treatments aimed at silencing her symptoms and shortening her hospitalization to send her back home to the "community," ECT in fact acted as a form of torture akin to the punitive shock treatments deployed against "insurgents" in India-occupied Kashmir. Returning home in her devastated, silenced (shocked) state was no panacea for Mauna (and patients like her), as it exacerbated the strained relations between Mauna and her parents and the financial and affective stress they experienced in trying to care for their daughter. Similarly, Varma shows how NGO workers who seek to assess trauma among community members through survey-

based questionnaires struggle (or even refuse) to translate the accounts and pleas for material help that they hear into the checkboxes and canned narratives that aid organizations formulate, and on which they depend to provide evidence of their efficacy and future aid from international donors. Such mismatches between the narratives that the afflicted recount (and the aid they seek) and those that aid-givers want to have narrated (to limit the type of aid given), expose—as well as perpetuate—the medico-political violence that militarized occupation inflicts on Kashmiris.

Like the pounding rain dissolving sand into the waves and inducing pungent smells to emanate from soaked objects in its wake, the silence-filled and silencing narratives of occupation that pervade Varma's ethnography dissolve easy distinctions between militarized acts of violence and medico-psychiatric acts of care, highlighting, as have other psychological anthropologists, the multi-sided, often ambivalently harmful aspects of care. In attempting to "acknowledge" Kashmiris' suffering as interminable, rather than "recognize" and attempt to treat them, in Giordano's terms, local psychiatrists and psychosocial support workers end up widening rather than bridging the "gap," or "layered miscommunication and mistranslations" that inhere in their and their patients' "radically different expectation of care" (147). And as Varma suggests, even as humanitarian aid organizations attempt to define their services in contrast to pharmaceutical-dominated public mental health care or the Indian state's "culture of surveillance and mistrust," their efforts still foreclose and silence possibilities for an imagined otherwise.

Listening to Political Spaces of Silence

As we've suggested above, along with feminist scholars, anthropologists, and other critical thinkers, we maintain that silences and remainders are not just repositories from which possibilities for hope arise, even if they can foster hope as well, as we saw in Mattingly's and Samuels' works. Psychological anthropology's attention to silences and acts of silencing can

also reveal the contours and textures of lived experiences of abjection. Sarah Willen (2019) shows this in her ethnography, *Fighting for Dignity: Migrant Lives at Israel's Margins*. Following Imogen Tyler's (2013) "unfaithful read(ing) of Kristeva," Willen defines "abjectivity" as "the intimate entanglements of law and state power in the lives of people consigned to abject spaces and sociopolitical positions" (2019, 10). Melding together Arthur Kleinman's (1999) notion of a "local moral world" with E. P. Thompson's (1963) and James Scott's (1976) notion of a "moral economy," Willen coins the term "local moral economy" to refer to Israel's biopolitical terrain in which its historical memory of the Holocaust and perpetual wars with neighbors lead Jewish Israelis to view Palestinian citizens of Israel as "real" Others and non-Jewish, illegalized, international migrant workers in Israel as "other Others," both of whom the Israeli state and many of its citizens consider, to varying and troubling degrees, as unwelcome threats to national security and economic prosperity. In this equation, migrant workers were treated, particularly in the wake of Israel's mass deportation campaign against un- or no-longer-authorized workers, as undeserving of rights, privileges, or even a space of dignity and belonging in Israel, and as deserving of violence and degradation much like the "real" Others.

Facing this regime of sociopolitical abjection, migrants made themselves as invisible and silent as possible in desperate attempts to avoid arrest and deportation, avoiding public space and hardly ever speaking up in public. As Yvonne, a university-educated Nigerian working as a housecleaner told Willen, "You *try* to be a nobody" (Willen 2019, 102). Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon, Willen sharply points out how "the self-denigrating pursuit of 'nobodiness' takes a deep existential toll," as migrants are denied "the chance, in Hannah Arendt's terms, to be judged according to *who*, and not *what* one is" (103). Detailing the lived experiences of migrants in Israel's hostile political terrain, Willen shows how self-effacement, fear, and the impossibility of speech become embodied.

Yet Willen's attention to lived experience also shows another aspect of the critical work of person-centered analyses of silence: in addition to, and even despite utter abjection, as

"home" becomes an impossible imaginary space of safety that does not exist or cannot endure for Israel's global migrant workers, migrants nevertheless forge what she terms "inhabitable spaces of welcome" (2019, 18). These are fleeting moments, sometimes fostered in a physical space, such as at church or someone's apartment, or through social relations. What is key is that they are situations in which migrants may "feel existentially and morally grounded, supported, and safe even under fraught and rapidly changing sociopolitical circumstances," and thus can pursue a "dignified, flourishing life" even in the face of crushing and threatening discourses and conditions (18). Willen's ethnographic attention to such spaces, we want to emphasize, is grounded in an attention to how migrants live out their narratives – their hopes and dreams that they sometimes are able to forge as existential realities in their interactions with friends, families, or advocates, even as these remain precarious and open-ended, just like the image with which we began, of droplets nourishing the grass, or ripples distorting and melting into the current. As alternative, sometimes hardly perceptible narratives, migrants' ephemeral inhabitable spaces of welcome reveal something fundamental about the condition of being human, which is an imperative not just to survive, but to strive to flourish, in connection with others.

Another powerful example of an ethnography that turns a keen anthropological listening to political spaces of silence into political critique, is Rebecca Lester's ethnography, *Famished: Eating Disorders and Failed Care in America* (2019). Like Willen, Lester also focuses on how public discourses, neoliberal governance, and, in this ethnography, insurance-dominated healthcare[4] can foreclose people's attempts to flourish. Women's struggles with eating, she suggests, cannot be reduced to the fashion industry's veneration of thinness. At root is also

[4] In the US, healthcare delivery has become increasingly dominated by Health Management Organizations (HMOs) that frequently deny patients what these profit-seeking companies deem as overly costly and unnecessary care.

women's sense that they must not desire care and nurturing, and that they do not deserve to take up space in the world.

Health insurance companies that serve as gatekeepers to eating disorders treatment, Lester shows, repeatedly reinforce this narrative script of silencing, pathologizing, and invisibilizing women's desires, and thereby exacerbate structural inequalities along gender and class lines.[5] In denying and shortening treatment benefits to clients who are clearly struggling, and accusing them of being manipulative and undeserving of care, insurance companies fuel women's ambivalence about asking for and complying with care. Gatekeepers not only leave eating disorder clients with little choice than to forgo care or bankrupt themselves or their families in seeking it, but also leave clinicians unable to provide care, and resigned to formulating accounts that frame would-be patients as incapable—and undeserving—of receiving help and therefore as unsavable. Yet as a former eating disorders client and current therapist herself, Lester does not simply highlight the aporias involved in care and the ways that structural forces silence and foreclose narratives of hope; she also uses her unique positionality in the ethnography to formulate counternarratives that would better serve sufferers, advocating for specific measures to foster both structural changes in government policy and healthcare management in the US, and changes in how to understand eating disorders. Her ethnography exemplifies how psychological anthropologists may develop critiques and alternative possibilities when writing with an attunement to silence.

The ethnographies considered throughout this section reveal how political critiques figure centrally in psychological anthropology works that explore, more or less explicitly, how silences are part of narratives and the kinds of subversive spaces they create. Much like Garcia's work on addiction and dispossession in New Mexico, Stevenson's writing on the

[5] The fact that the majority of eating disorders clients are White suggests that race inequalities in even the detection of eating disorders are so pervasive that they ironically go virtually unnoticed; for how this is achieved through narrative interaction, see also Shohet 2018.

psychic life of biopolitics in the Canadian arctic, and Pinto's examination of gendered inequities in domestic and institutional spaces in northern India, they foreground how in contexts of structural and post/colonial inequality, silences within narratives foster an open-endedness that enables imagining and enacting alternative social possibilities. And like Mattingly's work on interaction as narrative, they reveal how the often unspoken, or "unheard," stories in the shadows of dominant categories may yet open up possibilities of reconsidering relations of power and resisting structures of oppression. In these ethnographies, we similarly see how through "sideshadowing" and "subjunctive" modes of narrating, people grapple with uncertainty and trouble in their lives. We therefore do not consider the potentiality of our broad narrative approach to illuminate people's engagement with uncertainty on the one hand, and their efforts to forge spaces of political critique on the other, as unrelated. To the contrary, the spaces that silences within narratives create for people to navigate uncertainty can generate, as well as reflect, political critique. Moreover, as the ethnographies discussed in this chapter show, anthropologists attending to these silences can engage in political critique by writing with silence in their narratives. Focusing on uncertainty and political critique in turn, we hope to have shown a range of analytical emphases – and tools – that together illuminate the potential of a narrative approach to a critical and vibrant psychological anthropology.

Conclusion: Against Closure

The ethnographies we have featured are but a fraction of the generative body of work that psychological anthropologists have formulated to address political, economic, racial, gender, and other inequities that continue to plague and assault individuals and communities around the world. They do so by attending to the vicissitudes of human experience, often at the micro level of individual – but not monadic, and always already peopled, historical – subjectivity. Not all of these ethnographies take silence as their central focus; however, each hints at how silences punctuate and inflect narratives. In so doing, they reveal how silences both signal uncertainty

and create a space for undermining the certainty of teleologies and hegemonic ways of viewing the world, and this affords possibilities for political critique. Often, political critiques are muted or go unheard, hidden in spaces of non-alignment and whispers that counter dominant views. But when listening for silences, and silences *in* narratives, we can both hear these critiques and align with them by bringing them to the surface and refusing the closure of utter muteness.

In short, the lens that attunes to the power of silence sees more than just repression or inarticulation. Together with and as a focal analytic dimension of narrative – which we posit is not simply a monologic account of past events or future aspirations, but a dynamic, nonlinear unfolding of imagined and lived experience that is always already imbued by the residues of and connections with others – this lens affords a unique vantage point from which to theorize the world we apprehend through the full range of our senses, and to imagine worlds that could be otherwise. It may be tempting to equate narrative with monolithic and constraining tropes designed to enforce hegemonic meanings and iniquitous power relations; this risks, however, leaving silence under-theorized as a black box of that which cannot be heard, articulated, or understood.

Studying silence *and* narrative and silence *in* narrative, using such concepts as subjunctivity, sideshadowing, and narrative dramas in interaction, we suggest, are promising and powerful tools for embracing uncertainty and confronting, critiquing, and configuring alternate epistemologies and ontologies that facilitate, and not just foreclose, possibilities for human flourishing. Revisioning and revisiting silence and narrative as unfolding in lifeworlds reveals their vast potential to speak from and to structures and politics of inequality. This is not only relevant, but vital for a continued and newly engaged psychological anthropology that is in dialogue with the wider discipline and beyond. For like the hailstones and the raindrops, our narratives and silences travel, move, and affect, if ever so slightly, the worlds they are part of and help to shape, leaving them open to endings not yet imagined.

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