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## Media Narratives and Possibilities for Teachers' Embodied Concepts of Self

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### Abstract

Non-print media of radio, television, and film tell narratives about the image and practice of teachers, but how might these media narratives shape conceptions of teachers as well as teachers' conceptions of themselves? What elements of the media narratives do we incorporate and reject in the narratives that we construct about their professional identities? How do these media and personal narratives interact with larger social narratives, such as the purposes for schools and gender role expectations? We take a historical view of the shaping power of media narratives and the contexts in which they flourished by looking to past depictions of teachers in radio, television, and film.

*Keywords: teacher image, popular media, narrative analysis, ideological frames, audience reception*

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"We are shaped according to the habit of spectacle."  
(Fleckenstein 2003, 55)

In reviewing trends in media literacy education, Martens (2010) emphasizes helping K-12 students analyze mass media texts, with some scholarly discussion about higher education contexts. Instead of focusing on student learning, we explore in this article the possible role of media in shaping perceptions of a teacher's identity. Radio, television, and film tell narratives about the image and practice of teachers, but here we ask, "How might media narratives influence teachers' self-concept in classrooms as well as the viewing audience's concepts of teachers?" "What elements of media narratives that are constructed about teachers' professional identities might we incorporate and or reject?" "How do media and personal narratives interact with larger social narratives, such as the purposes for schools and gender role expectations?" Because we make meaning through the hearing, reading, writing, viewing, and (re)telling of stories, narrative analysis provides the means for comprehending how and why we represent and socially construct concepts of teachers through mass media narratives; personal narratives of teachers, students, and administrators; and the historical narratives that aim to interpret them all.

Multiple definitions of narrative offer various structures for positioning our identities in relation to these texts, and the trustworthiness of these narratives

rests on their ability to offer sufficient coherence within our ideological frames. Because of the evolving social, cultural, and historical contexts in which we create narratives as well as our own individual sense of self, these texts are often revised as new information is either accommodated or excluded by our adjusted frames. We thus offer the theoretical framework of narrative analysis to enhance the understanding of media representations of teachers.

### Popular Media Images of the Teacher: Social and Personal Context

Media narratives of teachers' characters and embodied classroom lives abound, although the definitive extent of their influence on practicing teachers and the public remains speculative or largely unknown (McCullick, Belcher, Hardin and Hardin 2003; Shaw and Nederhouser 2005; Thomsen 1993). Teacher educators may agree with Early, former president of the National Council of Teachers of English, who avoided teacher films "like the plague" because they tend to be too "schmaltzy" (April 10, 2007). Early "prejudged" the film *Dangerous Minds* (1995) and decided not to view it because she "couldn't stand" seeing Michelle Pfeiffer as a teacher. Even so, and perhaps especially because of this kind of strong reaction from a professional educator, media depictions of teachers merit careful examination. Through thematic analysis within

and across media narratives, we can “reveal the ideological, motivational, and idiosyncratic meanings individuals and groups attach to words, relationships, symbols, and institutions” related to schools and teachers (Stewart and Malley 2004, 225). Such analyses can also disclose how personal narratives are renegotiated within such frames based upon new knowledge and one’s own historical context. Fleckenstein (2003) observes:

Images tend to nest in a range of senses, resulting in meanings that are collaborative products of sound, sight, and touch, providing full and resonant (what Sandra Harding would call robust) significance to meaning. Seeing doesn’t occur alone or in isolation but is accompanied by feeling. After all the physiological system of visualization includes the apparatus to detect texture. Furthermore, touching frequently evokes colors; sounds carry with them visions and visceral twinges, each suggesting a nesting of imagery. (20)

We *feel* the images we see, and we feel them in our bodies in many different ways. Indeed, those images may become—in the power that our feelings have on how we understand the world—who we think ourselves to be. An engaged viewer of media representations reciprocates through a kind of re-creation of the images. Dewey (1934) asserted: “For to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent” (54). Each encounter with a media depiction is an opportunity for the viewer to imagine a teacher’s identity as a perceived *real* human being even though changing life experiences and social contexts contribute to different understandings at different times (Dewey 1934, Greene 2001). Aesthetic experiences with media images of teachers can foster a new awareness about previously accepted notions of mundane teaching/learning contexts and the humans who inhabit them and “may make less likely an unthinking acceptance of disembodied, technicist ways of being in the world” (Greene 1984, 126)—or they may reaffirm prejudices and stereotypes. How we view teachers, how we imagine their motives and movements, may also have a profound impact on what we as a society expect of them: “People are constantly engaged in a process of negotiating the connection between their personal narratives and these

dominant societal narratives” (Murray 2003, 99).

Just as a “speech community” has its own “discourse norms” and “ideological norms” (Fairclough 1995, 27), as authors of this article, our personal preconceptions as teacher educators inevitably shape the way we imagine teachers should, most authentically, be represented. Our beliefs then shape the historical and analytical narrative we construct as researchers about the possible influence of selected images. Although any representation will be “mediated by the researcher’s own professional, personal, and collective knowledge and experiences,” acknowledgment of bias should contribute to the research narrative’s trustworthiness (Dyson and Genishi 2005, 82). To state our bias directly, as teacher educators, we aspire to prepare future teachers to be educated professionals, who make informed judgments about curriculum content, instructional methods, and effective assessments to foster student-centered learning all the while developing a distinctive and personal style of interaction, guidance, and authority. We regard effective teachers with professional admiration and respect. That regard does not often emerge in mass media depictions of teachers, an omission that highlights an interesting tension between professional, progressive pedagogy and essentialized public expectations and policies about education that may well be influenced by stereotypical depictions. We seek trustworthiness in our analysis in the multiple perspectives we can access.

The multiple readings of a teacher narrative are further “a function of the distribution of a text,” so that availability of the teacher image impacts its response (Fairclough 1995, 128). Knowing where a television program is in the daytime/prime time schedule, the influence of the network and the number of affiliates that air the program in certain regions of the country, the other program choices simultaneously on the air, and whether other media, such as magazines and film, offer similar teacher images—all affect the influence of an ideology in the reception of a text. Hence, to take a historical view of the shaping power of media narratives and the contexts in which they flourished, we looked to past depictions of teachers in radio, television, and film. Although the teacher images in *Our Miss Brooks* (1948-1957), *Mister Peepers* (1952-1955), and *Teacher’s Pet* (1958) are “fixed” within the media of the post-war United States (and all such images are inevitably housed in an historical context) we can renegotiate their narrative

meanings to gain a wider-angled view (Ryan 2008).

### *The Media Narrative: Definition and Organization*

Different definitions of narrative forms also allow for multiple meanings of teacher images to occur. Some scholars define narrative as the telling of a story progressively through time. This notion of narrative could be a chronology of events, a story structured with a beginning, middle, and end, or a “sequence of action, connected by causal and temporal terms” (Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob 1995; Carr 1986a; Nelson 2004, 97). In examining media images, a researcher could construct a narrative of how the teacher image changed from the 1950’s to the 1960’s and focus less on individual teacher accounts and more on political and cultural trends impacting public education. Alternatively, a teacher may arrange her self-narrative chronologically according to how she and others see her as an intern, novice, veteran, and mentor teacher over the years. Some theorists insist on defining narrative through plot, while others argue that fragmented stories are still narratives (Chandler, Lalonde, and Teucher, 2004, referencing Polkinghorne 1988 and Frank 1995). According to a plot definition, a teacher memory of an event may not constitute a narrative, if it lacks the appropriate structure. We question that assumption; conflict, action, and characters—central ingredients to plot—can be deeply embedded and not explicitly articulated in memories and in images. Narratives can exist without words; an oil painting can articulate a story (Chandler et al 2004, referencing Wildgen 1994).

An example of a story-telling visual image, a caricature drawing by Wach-Steter of Eve Arden, as the high school English teacher on the CBS comedy *Our Miss Brooks* (1948-1957), can then be considered a visual narrative form. By applying White’s (1987) allegorical narrative analysis approach to Wach-Steter’s 1956 caricature of Miss Brooks, a story about the radio and television narratives aired about her emerges through the symbols in the drawing. Miss Brooks, wearing a neatly tailored blouse and skirt, stands before an oversized globe and apple, emblems of classrooms and of teachers. In her hands, she holds a yardstick and a slate that states, “READIN RITIN AND ROMANCE.” This new version of the three R’s coincides with the themes of the program, which focus more on Miss Brooks’s romantic and marital interest in Mr. Boynton, the biology teacher at her school, and less on the academic instruction in

her English classroom. Atop her oversized head is a black mortarboard with dangling tassel to emphasize her teacher identity. The symbols depicted are very traditional teacher images, and the program advocates a traditional gender role for women as well. Rather than advance in her profession, Miss Brooks concentrates more on becoming a wife and mother with the hope to thereupon leave teaching. In fact, her professional role at Madison High School is largely defined according to the archetype of a nurturing mother. The caricature effectively tells a story that could stand on its own because of its iconographic symbols, but it also clearly supports the radio and television narratives that aired on this prime time CBS program.

### *The Media Narrative: Audience Evaluation*

Whatever form a narrative takes, its creation is a co-construction between the initiator of the discourse and the audience that interprets it. Brown (1995) notes that communication “requires effort on the part of the speaker in constructing a helpful message and also on the part of the hearer in working out what the speaker might have meant” (16). She goes on to explain:

[A]n ideal speaker will consider what B [the listener] might already know which relates to this supposedly new information. In turn, an ideal listener will interpret what A [the speaker] says, not only in light of what B already knows, but also in the light of what B knows, or believes, about A’s own state of knowledge and belief. (217)

The creation of a meaningful discourse or narrative entails the adoption of another person’s perspective. For a radio or television program, or for a film to be successful, writers, directors, and producers—the initiators of the discourse or media narrative—must envision what will resonate with audiences according to their perceived values, interests, needs, and sensitivities. A researcher who tries to construct a narrative of the narrative between the program creators and the audience should know the context and the background that both the initiators and the recipients of the information bring to the situation. If assumptions made by the participants or by the researcher are ill founded, then the communication breakdown inhibits the intended message. An “adequate exchange of information,” however, can occur upon “the establishment of a structure of mutual beliefs,” so that participants “make rational and confident

interpretations of the other's utterances" (Brown 1995, 232-33).

If people communicate best within a shared ideology then, as Brown (1995) observes, the listener frequently is the cause of any misunderstanding "because of the listener's difficulty in relating what the speaker has said to the listener's own perception, or memory, of the nature of features or events in the world" (235). If one considers the historian and the discourse analyst to be the ultimate, retrospective recipients of the information, then how are they educated "to listen" responsibly? Where does one look to capture the multiple perspectives of a teacher narrative?

To understand and to analyze the non-print image of the teacher necessitates capturing the multiple perspectives of both the creators of the image as "speakers" and the audience as "listeners." Fairclough (1995) notes that analyzing a television program's text requires knowledge of "the routines and processes of programme production, and the circumstances and practices of audience reception" (9). Changing media can also be a factor in how we respond to media depictions. When *Our Miss Brooks* transitioned from radio to television in 1952, how did the actors' facial expressions and gestures and the depictions of Miss Brooks's rented room and classroom affect the themes previously presented only in an audio format? The 1950's television comedy about a middle school science teacher, *Mister Peepers*, was performed live in New York City. How would the comparison of teacher images in separate programs be impacted by one carefully timed, live production versus another program's videotaped episode heavily edited with a laugh track after several retakes? Hooper and Nielsen ratings, fan letters, articles in popular magazines and scholarly journals, and critical reviews of programs in newspapers help to assess how a media image is incorporated or rejected according to people's ideological frames in any given historical context.

Although it is generally accepted among scholars that the broadcast media reflect and shape public attitudes, it is difficult to determine causal relationships. The popularity of a television program or film might have little to do with the portrayal of the teacher or the school. The genre, the fame and likeability of the actors, the other competing programs and films vying for audience attention, the non-educational subplots, all may complicate

audience attitudes, so that ratings and box office earnings may not be accurate indicators of public satisfaction with teacher portrayals. Neither does critical acclaim always coincide with wider audience approval or disapproval. Despite high ratings for *Our Miss Brooks*, where *Variety* reported the radio program reaching the eleventh and seventh ranks in the Nielsen ratings and Hooper ratings, *The English Journal* in 1949 was initially critical of the teacher portrayal as unrealistic and denigrating to the profession ("Nielsen's Newest Top 20" 1949, 22; "Hooper's Top 15 and the Opposition" 1949, 27; "About Radio" 1949, 239-240).

In a conference paper, Thomsen (1993) reports that results of Gallup and Phi Delta Kappa polls about public teachers and schools from 1969 to 1990 seemed to correlate highly with the contemporary film portrayals of teachers. Because respondents who had connections to teachers and schools evaluated American schools better than those respondents without intimate familiarity, Thomsen suggests that the negative film representations could possibly account for the lower ratings of teachers and schools by non-participants in education. Thomsen, however, does not assert any decisive causality or the extent of the media influence: "It is difficult to measure the size of the effect—whether it is one of reinforcement or cultivation—but the belief that some effect exists has face validity" (24).

### *Trustworthiness in the Narrative*

Once a narrative is co-created, how do we determine its trustworthiness? The qualitative researcher's quest for understanding is not the same as a scientific, quantitative search for truth (Norman 1991). Instead of searching for a "correct interpretation," the historian and the discourse analyst look for an "adequate interpretation" (Brown 1995, 22). Historical explanations "need only be sufficient, not conclusive" (Rury 1993, 258). The personal narratives that construct a teacher's identity are also "works in progress." Quantification might address the "what questions," but narrative addresses the "why" by revealing truths in a version of a "working hypothesis" (Stone 1981, 84; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Moreover, truth does not always reside in facts. Through allegory, the historical narrative re-presents multiple truths by replicating experience: "The story told in the narrative is a mimesis of the story lived in some region of historical

reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation, it is to be considered a truthful account thereof" (White 1987, 27). To negate the possibility of historical narrative to reveal lived truths would be also to deny "literature and poetry have anything valid to teach us about reality" (White 1987, 44). Literary fiction after all "represents an emotional truth and a fidelity to human experience" by using art to voice shared life themes (Lightfoot 2004, referencing Calvino 1977, 25). Post-structural and post-modern criticism of narratives for creating fictions reveals a "prejudice" that science has a monopoly on truth and a blind eye to the ways science constructs its own narratives through symbol systems (Cmiel 1993; Appleby et al 1995; White 1987, 48).

A narrative may be incomplete and ever ready for revision, but that does not make it false (Appleby et al 1995; Norman 1991). In our own "individual realities" we strive to create a "whole and seamless" narrative, and historical accounts "should ideally be a virtually seamless description and analysis of events, personalities, and other forces at work in connection with a particular problem" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 82; Rury 1993, 266). The inevitability of gaps, due to missing data or disconfirming evidence that cannot yet be incorporated, does not, however, undermine the usefulness of the existing narrative. Stereotypical images of teachers emerge because certain commonalities prevail through comportment and physical appearance. Individual teacher differences, which may be categorized as anomalies, are excluded from the stereotypical narrative for the sake of seamless coherence. In the historical record, often documented are the elite, who are not necessarily the prime movers of events, and the "persecuted minorities," who are "by definition exceptional since they are in revolt against the *mores* and beliefs of the majority" (Stone 1981, 58).

Miss Brooks and Mr. Peepers may represent exceptional teachers, but elements of their narratives still address perceived norms about their profession, and we may then wonder how closely this narrative image corresponds with the actual, embodied experiences of classroom teachers. For a researcher constructing a narrative, it can also be challenging to differentiate the various roles a person might play or to discover people's principles, prejudices, and competing motivations (Stone 1981). How self-aware might a teacher be about what elements of the Miss Brooks character influenced her professional identity? In discovering patterns across media and

personal narratives about teachers, a researcher may also not fully know if the sample is sufficiently representative to make generalizations (Stone 1981). New narratives, told by the non-print media and by teachers, will be created to accommodate new data and previously unreconciled, disconfirming evidence.

Recognizing the influence of media narratives upon self-concepts, scholar researchers have used films about teachers to promote reflection among pre-service teachers about their professional identities and instructional practices. Acknowledging the influence of watching "the wacky caricature of a teacher" in *Our Miss Brooks* and the "very motherly schoolteacher" in *Leave It To Beaver*, Brunner (1994) in her childhood dreamed of becoming a teacher, and in the afternoons she would pretend to be a teacher while a friend of hers was the student (113). Informed by the critical theories of Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire, Brunner believes that "much of our work in teacher education becomes a matter of helping student-teachers unlearn harmful images of teachers and schooling by offering opportunities to critique inequitable structures" (115). Alternatively, Lasley (1998) reports that film images of excellent teachers model the paradigm shifts educators make in transforming their instructional practices by moving "outside themselves and into the minds of their students" (84). Mr. Holland in *Mr. Holland's Opus*, Ms. Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*, and Mr. Escalante in *Stand and Deliver* exemplify good reflective practice when they recognize why their teacher-controlled instructional paradigm does not work and switch to a student-centered learning approach (Ryan 2008).

In using film to examine the representations of teachers' professional and personal lives, one of Trier's (2001) teacher education students responded to *To Sir, With Love* by wishing that she could "give as much time to [her] work as a teacher as Sir did" (132), and other students worried about public expectations that teachers not have personal lives and that they should be single-mindedly dedicated to their professions. Shaw and Nederhouser (2005) argue that "[w]hen real teachers vicariously experience the stories of reel teachers, they also come to perceive the narrative threads in their own professional lives, and they zero in on their identities as teachers" (86). Although pre-service teacher-education students were critically aware of how Hollywood constructed teacher identities, Rosen (2004) discovered that these future educators

still wished to conform to the media idealizations, and the films still instigated anxieties about their teaching abilities. In sharing popular media images of educators with pre-service teachers, teacher educators must also help to develop the skills of the viewers to analyze these media as texts (Ryan, 2008).

### **Analyzing the Ideologies Within Media Narratives: Constructing the Teacher Self**

The content of these narratives embodies ideologies, and to achieve coherence any narrative revisions will need to conform to existing frames or become part of a newly modified frame (Goffman 1974/1986). Through reconstruction, texts “provide evidence of ongoing processes such as the redefinition of social relationships between professionals and publics, the reconstitution of social identities and forms of self, or the reconstitution of knowledge and ideology” (Fairclough 1995, 209). Such “scripts,” “dominant discourses,” or “master narratives” can inform media images of teachers in an idealized, stereotypical, or otherwise unrealistic way. In defining Miss Brooks’ professional identity as a caring mother figure towards her students, the *Our Miss Brooks* program advocates a restrictive gender role for women. In one episode Miss Brooks forgoes teaching on Monday to care for the younger siblings of one of her students (CBS, November 14, 1948). Would a teacher realistically do this?

Ideologies about teaching methods can also inform the media depictions of classrooms and the expected teacher role. The furniture arrangement of students’ desks in rows facing Mr. Peepers’ desk anticipates a traditional transmission model of instruction, where this general science teacher is considered the source of knowledge (Eisner 2002). In fact, all the demonstrations and experiments occur on the symbolic territory of Mr. Peepers’ desk. The ideologies that emerge in the program’s narratives are reinforced by accompanying commercials. Recognizing the female audience demographics for *Our Miss Brooks*, sponsors advertised Palmolive soap, Lustre Crème shampoo, and other home and beauty products, which were typically purchased by women consumers and offered ways to enhance appearances to attract men. Miss Brooks, herself, was interested in capturing Mr. Boynton’s romantic interest, and so the advertised products coincided well with the program’s narrative messages.

The ideologies do not merely reside in the media narratives of teachers, but they can also provide frames for future action for their audiences (Daiute and Lightfoot 2004; Fairclough 1995; Goffman 1974/1986). In response to *Our Miss Brooks*, Eve Arden was offered over a dozen teaching positions and was honored as a member of the National Education Association. Wally Cox, who portrayed Mr. Peepers, received mail correspondence from teachers, parents, and students “about their own school and student problems,” and for one evening he introduced an episode as an answer to a viewer’s letter (NBC, September 18, 1952). These media narratives “make action possible because they make it meaningful” (Appleby et al 1995, 236). Audiences, however, can derive multiple meanings from the media images of teachers. Because of the constructed realities created by students, parents, teachers, and administrators the “nature of school knowledge, the organization of the school, the ideologies of teachers, indeed any educational issue all become relative” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, citing Barton and Walker 1978, 78). Such a diverse audience will often internalize different perceptions of the same image.

Because the media projects “[m]aster narratives through which and, importantly, *against* which individuals compose the personal understandings of their lives” (Daiute and Lightfoot 2004, 178), narrative analysis can help us to discover how teachers perceive their identities in relation to the viability of these representations. In a study of life narratives by artists, Freeman (2004) observes that some artists “had bought into a myth about the struggling genius, at odds with the world, [and] that had actually stunted their creativity” (69). The construction of narratives through media images can influence how teachers define their own roles. When Mr. Peepers, despite a worsening cold, stays up all night to revise his teaching notes to help his students succeed on a re-test, do teachers accept this narrative of personal sacrifice as an inherent aspect of their professional identity (NBC, February 1, 1953)?

Historical contexts surrounding the production and reception of media images impact narrative meaning. In 2003-2004, 75 percent of public school teachers were women, but their reasons for entering the profession could be very different from the women in the immediate post-war era, because 48 percent of public school principals then were also women (National Center for Education Statistics

2006). Rather than conforming to traditional gender role expectations, women entering teaching currently may define their professional choices differently. Smulyan (2004) notes that in a longitudinal study of the career choices of 28 women at an elite college, some decided to enter teaching for the opportunity to promote social justice, perhaps thereby redefining what it means to be a teacher by taking "the gendered notion of care into a more public arena" (529).

Mr. Peepers' generally teacher-centered instruction aligns with the back-to-basics essentialist model evinced through public educational policy in the post-war U.S., notably exemplified by the National Defense Education Act of 1958, yet simultaneously *Teachers College Record*, a leading journal in education, endorsed student-centered approaches in profiling progressive educators such as Felix Adler, Caroline Pratt, and Margaret Naumburg (Beck 1958a, 1958b, 1959). Similarly today, as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act, accountability through high-stakes testing often counters progressive instructional practices advocated by teacher education programs. In observing media depictions of classroom instruction, teachers may thus mediate their own narratives about professional identity according to these parallel dichotomies of educational history.

Fictional representations of teachers can model for us how real teachers might adapt their personal narratives in response to challenges to their ideological frames. In the film *Teacher's Pet* (1958), the world of journalism in "ivory tower" academia and the world of journalism in the "real world" of a daily city newspaper meet with conflicts because each realm has its own ideological constructs. University journalism instructor Erica Stone (Doris Day) represents the academic view of journalism, and Jim Gannon (Clark Gable), as the city editor of the *New York Evening Chronicle*, represents the "school-of-hard-knocks." Stone and Gannon are successful according to the standards of their separate worlds, and they each construct personal narratives that validate their identities. Esteeming her role as an instructor, Stone quotes her father who said, "Education teaches a man how to spell 'experience,'" and through teaching she wants to elevate journalism from a "trade" into a "profession." Gannon, who never went to high school, believes journalism can only be learned through "first hand experience" and "not sitting with your nose in a book at some cockamamie university." Before formally meeting, Stone and Gannon have further

constructed stereotypical narratives about each other. Gannon describes her as an "egghead," but then revises his opinion of her as a "dame," who is one of the "amateurs teaching amateurs how to be amateurs." Before she knows Gannon, Stone has received an insulting letter from him about his refusal to guest lecture one of her sessions. After reading the letter aloud to her class, Stone then characterizes him to her students according to an almost comic book portrayal:

You see, I happen to know Mr. Gannon very well. As a matter of fact, I can give you a perfect picture of this man without ever having seen him. He works, I'm sure, with a cigarette dangling from his mouth like so, in a suit that he hasn't had pressed in months. And, of course, he has the battered old hat that he wouldn't give up for the crown of England. Poker comes easy to him, but, oh boy, he drinks hard. After he's had a few, he'll always tell you, 'Why, I never even got to high school, and I'm proud of it.'... He boasts about his exploits with the ladies. Of course, he'll never marry anyone but his job. In short, he's a perfect example of that dying race: 'the unpressed gentleman of the press.'

The shaping of narrative ideologies thus also arises not only through affirming cherished beliefs, but also in rejecting a potentially threatening narrative.

Both their narratives about themselves and each other change, but only after they challenge each other's ideological frames. When Gannon enrolls in Stone's class under a pseudonym, he violates academia's norms by questioning her knowledge, her instructional methods, and her authority. The "keys" or "set of conventions" for classroom interaction include not interrupting the professor during a lecture, asking questions at the time the professor designates, and acknowledging the professor's expertise in the subject matter and in instructional methods (Goffman 1974/1986, 43). Aware of the unspoken norms, the other students resent Gannon's challenges to Stone that break the frame. He corrects her lecture citations and tries to undermine further the importance of her instruction by declaring that journalistic writing "doesn't look so hard." When Gannon turns in a brilliantly written piece after claiming to be a novice writer, Stone uses his essay as a model for the other students and tries to become his mentor. In the process of reaching out to incorporate him into her academic frame, Stone impresses Gannon with her knowledge of the newspaper business, which she learned from her

father, a Pulitzer prize-winning newspaper editor. Gannon also recognizes the knowledge he has missed without a formal education, and he counsels an errand boy at his newspaper to return to school by saying, “experience is the jockey—education is the horse.” He also accepts Stone’s impassioned assertion that a newspaper can be better than other media at providing in-depth features that explain the reasons behind the events.

When Gannon transforms Stone’s uncritical idolization of her father’s newspaper by allowing her to see for herself that the actual writing was not of a high caliber, she comes to respect the knowledge Gannon has learned from his years of experience at the *New York Evening Chronicle*. She also discovers that, as a teacher, she does not have to be the authority with all the answers. Stone then proposes a “wedding of the old pros and the eggheads” by suggesting that she and he co-teach a journalism course at the university. This “marriage of two minds,” also symbolized by their becoming a dating couple, was made possible by modifying their frames and narratives through assimilating new information and accommodating disconfirming evidence. *Teacher’s Pet*, in delineating the process for how new narratives can be created, may also then be a new source of information that teachers might accommodate into their narratives about their professional selves, moving from spectators of the event to embodied-in-imagination movers of the action.

Self-understanding depends on “our ability to construct a narrative and to tell a story” (Murray 2003, citing Sarbin 1990, 97), and such narratives furnish truths that are open for revision. New information and the accommodation of disconfirming evidence lead to a new synthesis that will no doubt be challenged in the future. This process nurtures growth in our understanding and learning. Rather than imposing an artificial construction on reality, Bruner (1990) observes how we innately “organize experience narratively” to make sense of our lives and that “culture soon equips us with new powers of narration...through the traditions of telling and interpreting” (79-80; see also Carr 1986b). As producers of narrative, mass media reflect and shape cultural norms, thus becoming not only a “forum for negotiating and renegotiating meaning and for explicating action,” but also “a set of rules or specifications for action” (Bruner 1986, 123).

## Conclusion

How might media narratives shape teachers’ sense of self? How might those narratives also influence what the students in our schools, their parents, and the politicians and administrators who mandate public school policy expect of teachers? These questions surely merit further exploration. Defining a teacher image could include considering the writing process of the staff writers and their prior professional and personal experiences that inform their scripts, the extent of the director’s control, the benefits and limitations of the production technology, the actors’ methods for preparation and their skill level, the presence/absence of a live audience for performance, the situation of the viewer at home, the influence of ratings affecting content, and the role of sponsors. To obtain such knowledge could involve reviewing drafts of scripts, interviewing professionals who worked on the programs, and witnessing the production of similar television shows. Through such research one could learn how different formats within and between programs influenced reception by the general public. Through written surveys and interviews of teachers and their students and through video recorded classroom observations as part of a case study, one might assess how teachers may internalize media messages and comport themselves in their classrooms according to their perceived frames (Dyson and Genishi 2005, Goffman 1974/1986). To an academic audience, removed perhaps from the purpose of entertainment, opportunities to perceive wider cultural, political, and educational themes abound.

When historians and discourse analysts construct and deconstruct media narratives, they engage in a process that individuals negotiate everyday to discover multiple truths about their lives and their world. As students in schools, we construct our identities through the academics, athletics, and other extracurricular activities directed by our teachers. While these educators inform our personal narratives about our strengths and weaknesses, media images of teachers influence how we evaluate their judgments. These same media images, however, also affect how teachers see themselves. By analyzing the non-print narratives about teachers in the popular media, we can come to recognize how these role models have the power to influence our very sense of self.



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