A Conceptual Framework of Narrative Persuasion

Anne Hamby,1 David Brinberg,2 and James Jaccard3

1Department of Marketing and International Business, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, USA
2Department of Marketing, Virginia Tech University, Blacksburg, VA, USA
3Center for Latino Adolescent and Family Health, New York University Silver School of Social Work, NY, USA

Abstract: This article draws insights from several disciplines to propose an integrated perspective on mechanisms underlying narrative persuasion. One approach to narratives emphasizes a deictic shift into the narrative, resulting in an absorbed state of processing and a loss of one’s sense of self (e.g., transportation, narrative engagement, identification). Another approach focuses on processes to construct meaning from a narrative; that is, how narratives are actively compared with and applied to one’s life. The current work has conceptualized the relationship between these two broad processes as occurring in sequence, and as a pathway of narrative persuasion: A shift and absorption into the narrative leads to a process of reflecting on the narrative, which is antecedent to narrative influence.

Keywords: narrative, persuasion, transportation, narrative engagement, deictic shift

Conceptualizing Narrative Persuasion

Every reader, as he reads, is actually the reader of himself. The writer’s work is only a kind of optical instrument he provides the reader so he can discern what he might never have seen in himself without this book.

Proust, Time Regained, 1933

Research on persuasion has emphasized how an individual processes expository, argument-based messages, yielding a literature focused on cognitively oriented, dual-process models of influence (Johnson, Maio, & Smith-McClallen, 2005). This emphasis is at odds with lived experience, in which politicians, businesses, and public health workers frequently and intuitively use stories as a means to inform and persuade. In a world where attention is an increasingly scarce resource, stories are singular in their ability to attract the interest of, and exert influence on, their audience.

Recently, researchers in fields such as psychology, communications, and advertising have noted that narratives are an effective vehicle to persuade, and have sought to articulate and understand the mechanisms underlying narrative influence. As a result of concurrent, cross-disciplinary work, different constructs and different processes have emerged to conceptualize narrative persuasion. Some proposed constructs overlap substantially, while others are distinct.

Research on narrative persuasion would benefit from a conceptual integration that organizes similar constructs and creates linkages among distinct processes to enhance theoretical development and substantive applications. The current work is an effort to develop a more comprehensive conceptualization of narrative persuasion.

Background, Objectives, and Organization

The term narrative encompasses communication efforts that vary across facets such as modality, format, length, emotional depth, and plotline complexity. This diversity is reflected in the multiple ways researchers have operationalized narratives. Hinyard and Kreuter (2007, p. 778) provide a useful definition that captures essential elements: “Any cohesive and coherent story with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end that provides information about scene, characters, and conflict; raises unanswered questions or unresolved conflict; and provides resolution.” Recent attention to mechanisms of narrative persuasion have been explored across substantive fields such as advertising (Escalas, 2007), political science (Landreville & LaMarre, 2011), and health communication (Banerjee & Greene, 2013), using a range of modalities, including text (Appel & Richter,
We first review work related to deictic shift theory, connecting it to recent conceptualizations of absorbed ways of narrative processing, and highlight antecedents to these processes. We include both a deictic shift and mental models perspective, consistent with Busselle and Bilandzic’s (2008) approach, and apply it to narrative persuasion. We also incorporate a process subsequent to a deictic shift – reflection – that the reader uses to create the meaning of the narrative message. From our perspective, message meaning is created after viewing the narrative and as the reader shifts back to the self.

We introduce and elaborate on the construct of reflection by drawing on previous work to define this construct. We discuss what reflection is, what it is not, and how it relates to deictic shift. We highlight outcomes of the narrative persuasion process, and consider moderators of the path between these two processes to develop a more comprehensive framework of narrative persuasion.

**Losing Oneself Into the Narrative:**

**Deictic Shift**

In everyday life, we are typically aware of our location and time, our environment, our motivations and goals, and experience life with reference to ourselves. This orienting point or perceptual vantage is a deictic center (Duchan et al., 1995). A shift from this vantage point to a perspective required to be absorbed by the story world is called a deictic shift.

Deictic shift theory (Duchan et al., 1995) proposes that readers shift their deictic center from themselves to a locus in the narrative in order to comprehend and be absorbed by a story. This entails adopting the perspective from which story events are described (e.g., from a character’s perspective, a narrator’s perspective, or a third-person perspective), and changing perspectives as the I shifts from character to character; that is, shifting from one’s normal view on the world (i.e., the self as reference point) to a perspective within a narrative at a different time and place. Reference to the actual world is transferred to the fictional world,
and the reader’s subjectivity is transferred to the characters (Galbraith, 1995).

This shift is necessary to process and begin comprehension of a story (Rapaport et al., 1989). According to a deictic shift perspective, the reader creates a mental model of the story world by first shifting her deictic center into that model, and then continuing to relate the information given in each successive sentence in the narrative to an understanding of the narrative as a whole. Zwaan (2015) describes this mental model as a representation of the people, objects, locations, events, and actions described in a text, which have a spatial, temporal, and psychological vantage point from which we vicariously experience the narrative.

A shift into the story world enables the story receiver to make inferences about an event sequence (Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994). For example, when a character braces before receiving an immunization, the reader must infer the character knew that the shot would hurt. As the deictic center shifts throughout the narrative, the reader maintains memory of prior deictic centers to create a full, textured mental representation of the narrative.

A deictic shift requires a “willing suspension of disbelief.” This uncritical approach makes cognitive resources available to generate the mental model of the story and, once engaged, decreases the reader’s ability to scrutinize messages in the narrative and to generate counterarguments (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004). Suspension of disbelief is often motivated by a desire to be entertained and enjoy the story world, but also has important implications for persuasion (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). We return to this discussion later in the paper.

The deictic shift and its maintenance is an active part of a story receiver’s processing of a narrative; substantial mental processes are necessary to construct the mental model of the narrative (Graesser et al., 1994). The story receiver experiences these processes as easy, in contrast to the perceived effort experienced while processing argument-based messages (Bruner, 1986). The processes underlying the deictic shift and mental creation of a story model collectively produce a feeling of being absorbed in the text, as one describes being lost in a book (Nell, 1988).

**Story Receiver’s Experience: Absorption in a Narrative**

Recent models that describe immersed ways to process a narrative, or psychological involvement in media (Tuckashinsky, 2014), are based on a deictic shift, although few studies formally incorporate mental models and deictic shift as the conceptual foundation to narrative absorption. One notable exception is Busselle and Bilandzic (2008), who develop the need for a deictic shift to move an audience from their current location into the narrative, and enable understanding of characters’ statements. Other mechanisms of becoming “experimentally involved in a text” (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 336) such as transportation (Green & Brock, 2000) and identification (Cohen, 2001) emphasize different ways of being absorbed, but each instantiation reflects a mechanism that shares core similarities. First, these constructs maintain that a shift outside oneself and into the story provides a vicarious experience and one that feels as if it was unfolding in real life. The shift into a character’s perspective provides intimate understanding of a story scenario, functioning as guided simulation through the story world. The specific perspective (third person, looking down upon a character vs. viewing the world through the character’s eyes) differs across absorption mechanisms (e.g., transportation, identification, engagement), but they all emphasize relocation into the story world.

Second, a deictic shift into a story entails the experience of intense emotions similar to the emotions we have in response to equivalent situations in our daily life (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Stories can also evoke general emotional reactions to plot developments; for example, an upward-trending storyline can put an audience in a generally favorable mood, while tragic story events may evoke sadness (Oatley, 1994). Although particular forms of emotional response differ across absorption mechanisms (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Cohen, 2001; Green & Brock, 2000), emotional engagement is a key facet of deictic shift into a story world.

Finally, a deictic shift into the story world suppresses skeptical responses (Dal Cin et al., 2004). Mental construction of the story world requires substantial cognitive resources and suspension of our critical way of processing the world. As a consequence, story information is accepted as true, by default; it must be disbelieved with effort (Gilbert, 1991). The audience must temporarily accept the story world as true to attain this state, which may allow for a form of influence akin to flying under one’s persuasion-resistance radar (Dal Cin et al., 2004).

This shift away from critical analysis when reading a narrative represents an important link to persuasion (Dal Cin et al., 2004). Perspectives on narrative absorption view this mechanism as a distraction that diverts attention away from a story’s persuasive subtext, yielding a story receiver who returns from the narrative world magically changed in ways consistent with the story (Slater & Rouner, 2002).

We now discuss several of the more widely explored constructs that result from a deictic shift and represent an absorbed way to process a narrative.

**Transportation**

This construct represents a holistic, “integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings” (Green & Brock, 2000,
p. 701). Individuals are transported into a narrative, yielding a state in which they are immersed in the story world. The experience of transportation is similar to flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Individuals become focused on what they are doing and lose a sense of self while engaged in the experience. Flow is a general experience, however, and can occur in response to a variety of activities, whereas transportation occurs in response to a narrative, entails the experience of emotional engagement and the generation of mental imagery, and influences beliefs and attitudes, which is not characteristic of the flow experience. Transported individuals are more likely to be persuaded by a narrative and accept story-consistent beliefs and attitudes (Dal Cin et al., 2007; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004).

**Narrative Engagement**

Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) developed the construct of narrative engagement, embedded in a more general framework that incorporated narrative comprehension; that is, a progressive mental construction of situation models that represent the people, places, and problems of a story (Zwaan, Langston, & Graesser, 1995). Narrative engagement included four dimensions—narrative understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement, and narrative presence—that characterize narrative processing and predict story-consistent attitudes and enjoyment.

At the conceptual level, transportation and narrative engagement share many features. They both describe a process in which one is absorbed by the story world seemingly with little effort, and in which one is unaware of activity in the surrounding environment. Both mechanisms describe an emotional engagement. Whereas transportation theory emphasizes story-receiver image generation, constraining its applicability to a subset of media, narrative engagement is more broadly applicable across media, placing emphasis on the concept of *narrative presence* or the mental construction of a narrative world. Finally, narrative engagement theory includes the concept of narrative understanding, which transportation theory treats as a necessary condition for absorption.

**Identification**

Cohen (2001) defines identification with story characters as, “a process that culminates in a cognitive and emotional state in which the audience member is aware not of him- or herself as an audience member, but rather imagines being one of the characters in the text” (p. 252). Cohen articulates four dimensions of identification: (a) empathy or sharing the feelings of the character (feelings not for the character, but with the character), (b) sharing the perspective of the character and degree to which an audience member feels he or she understands the character, (c) the degree to which the audience member internalizes and shares the goals of the character, and (d) the degree to which self-awareness is lost during exposure to the text. Identification is distinct from liking characters, perceiving similarity between oneself and a character, and imitation of a character. Many media scholars consider identification as a process that mediates the relationship between reading a narrative and persuasion (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012).

Transportation, narrative engagement, and identification are each conceptualizations of involvement with aspects of a narrative, entailing a perspective shift and the experience of emotion. Identification is a focused form of involvement and entails a strong attachment to a character, adopting his or her goals and perspective on the narrated events. For example, Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) manipulated the valence of information about a character and found this influenced identification (with the character) but not transportation (into the story). In contrast, transportation and engagement describe degree of absorption, with no specification of the target that evoked this absorption.

**Enhancing the Shift: Antecedents to Absorption**

Recent meta-analyses explored facets that enhance deictic shift and absorption into a narrative. Van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, and Wetzel’s (2014) categorized these antecedents into two groups. First, story-level variables (e.g., plots that contain rich, descriptive imagery) influenced the shift into the story world. Vivid, specific text can aid construction of entities and sequences in audiences’ minds, and plotlines that engender the question why? can sustain effort to continue to construct the story world. Further, a story character whose experiences are described in a way to allow the reader to know and feel the story world in the same way enhance the deictic shift and absorption into the story. A deictic shift is also enhanced by stories that exhibit verisimilitude or narrative realism. Whereas nonfiction realism refers to accurate depiction of facts or what has happened, narrative realism entails depicting of something that may happen (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).

Van Laer and colleagues’ meta-analysis also highlighted individual differences among story receivers that influence deictic shift. For example, some familiarity with the story topic or genre is necessary for basic comprehension and absorption into the narrative. Attention, or focused concentration on the story, enhances absorption into the narrative. Moreover, highly educated story-receivers can generate inferences necessary to comprehend a narrative more easily, which facilitates absorption. Finally, deictic shift is affected by transportability (individual difference regarding ability to be
absorbed into a story) and gender (i.e., females demonstrate higher levels of emotional participation, which influence the reader’s capacity to experience another’s feelings). Collectively, Van Laer and colleagues’ findings highlights the role the story-receiver plays in the interpretation of the narrative; individual attributes affect the intensity and effects of narrative absorption.

Tukachinsky’s (2014) meta-analysis of experimental manipulations on different types of media involvement yields conceptually similar results. Perhaps most interesting in her analysis is the finding that experimental manipulations do not influence alternative conceptualizations of involvement uniformly: Her results indicated that identification was most influenced by manipulation of the emotional content, while manipulations of background information, distraction task, and perspective taking were more likely to influence transportation; that is, manipulations embedded in the text had a stronger influence on identification, while extra-textual manipulations influenced transportation.

Part Summary

Transportation, narrative engagement, and identification are different ways to conceptualize consequences of a deictic shift and story model construction. Transportation includes cognitive and emotional engagement and visual imagery, but not an internalization of character goals, and assumes story comprehension as a precondition. Identification constrains the focalized perspective to that of a specific character. Narrative engagement specifies narrative understanding as a component and can accommodate different forms of emotional engagement (i.e., general or more character specific), but does not address the role of imagery.

Prior work examining antecedents to deictic shift (and, consequently, transportation, engagement, and identification) provides insights into factors that guide the nature of the shift, which can be broadly grouped as narrative-level and audience-level characteristics. Perspective is one narrative-level aspect that can evoke different mental models, and as a consequence, affect the nature of absorption in a story. For example, suppose we read a narrative from a character’s perspective (“Jen punched me”) or an omniscient lens (“Kathy punched Jen”). The shift to Kathy’s or Jen’s perspective will create different vicarious feelings (anger vs. fear) and thoughts (“she’s a liar” vs. “she’s aggressive”), and ultimately, what is learned. Perspective can be combined with story elements to produce the experience of suspense (“Kathy had no idea what was about to happen to her”), which may further reinforce the loss of self and continued construction of the story world.

Characteristics of story receivers also affect the construction of mental models, the deictic shift, and narrative absorption. Although the process often feels effortless to story receivers, individuals need to attend to the narrative, recall past knowledge and personal experiences, and are affected by their capacity to imagine and experience emotion. The likelihood a story receiver will shift into a narrative world is enhanced to the extent she perceives it to exhibit verisimilitude with the real world. That is, a story may take place on Mars, and the characters may even be Martians, but they must interact in a way that matches our understanding of social interaction, or be motivated to achieve goals that correspond with motives and goals that on might encounter in one’s real world. Together, this highlights the critical role the audience plays in producing the narrative; the loss of self that results from a deictic shift is not produced independent from the self.

Conceptualizing Reflection as Deictic Return

Researchers who developed and apply constructs associated with a shift into, and absorption with, a narrative (i.e., transportation, engagement, identification) often note these processes precede narrative influence, and treat these processes as the proximal cause of story-consistent changes. However, a deictic shift and subsequent absorption into the story does not necessarily result in persuasion; that is, a receiver may have memory of a story (a mental model of the narrative) that may endure over time, yet not incorporate elements from this model into their own real-world beliefs, attitude, and action.

A body of research indicates that stories do influence their receivers, but there is limited work on the mechanisms that cause this change. We examine perspectives derived from media psychology, narrative comprehension, and cognitive psychology to develop a more comprehensive model of narrative persuasion, highlighting the role of the deictic return, or reflection. We next describe the role of reflection in creating meaning from stories and as a mechanism of persuasion.

Reflection: A Process to Create Meaning

Deictic shift models highlight a process in which the individual creates a mental model of a story and then experiences the story world as one experiences real life. The mental model to represent this experience works silently in the background to make sense of the text and is updated as we encounter new information. Liberman, Gaunt, Gilbert, and Troke (2002) describe this experienced effortlessness as a reflexive (X system) process, which produces a stream of consciousness that each of us experience as the world out there. A corresponding reflective process
(C system) interprets the outputs of the X system to produce the conscious thoughts we experience as reflections on the stream of consciousness. The C system produces inferences and attributions about our experiences, and is a means by which one extracts meaning from stimuli filtered through the X system.

In the context of narrative persuasion, mental models that initiate deictic shifts resemble the X system, a self-unaware, effortless form of processing. We adopt the terminology of the C system and use the term reflection to represent a corresponding process to integrate the information obtained through the X system into one’s understanding of the real world.

Reflection: Background Research

Current models of narrative persuasion (e.g., Green & Brock, 2000) do not incorporate a reflective process, although researchers (e.g., Oliver & Raney, 2011) do highlight the need to create meaning from stories. Van Laer and colleagues (2014) note story receivers interpret narratives; that is, they do not passively shift out of stories, but reflect on their experience in a story to inform decisions about consumption (Bahl & Milne, 2010). In Fisher’s (1984) narrative paradigm, the individual understands and creates meaning from stories through a matching process between the story world and her own world. According to the narrative paradigm, humans have an ability to determine narrative rationality (interpreted value) of the stories based upon two aspects. Story receivers first examine the narrative coherence, which is a way to determine if the story holds together and makes sense in the story receiver’s world. Story receivers then consider narrative fidelity, or whether the story matches the receivers’ own beliefs and experiences and portrays the world of the story receiver (Fisher, 1984). The rationality of the narrative affects whether and how the reader applies that narrative to decisions in her own life.

A story receiver’s motivation to engage in a story may prompt reflection and personal change. Research on hedonic and eudemonic motivations suggests they affect the interpretation and response to the story differently (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Most research on narrative persuasion has treated hedonic motivation as underlying engagement with a narrative, and absorption occurs in pursuit of enjoyment (Green et al., 2004). When persuasion does occur for hedonically motivated readers, a sleeper effect is presented as an underlying causal mechanism (e.g., such that text labeled as fact or fiction exerts equivalent influence; Appel & Richter, 2007). This focus on hedonic motivation to engage in narratives has led to an emphasis on non- or low-conscious explanations for persuasion (i.e., as a collateral effect of engagement), and has neglected reflection as an alternative mechanism.

Eudemonic motivations include anticipations of “greater insight, self-reflection, or contemplations of poignancy or meaningfulness” (Oliver, 2008, p. 42), and are characterized by a motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience. Oliver anticipates the construct of reflection, noting that a “deep appreciation of some entertainment offerings should result in greater levels of reflection, deeper levels of processing and more extensive contemplation” (p. 59). Individuals with eudemonic motives engage in processing (e.g., reflection) that allow them to learn information, understand it, and store it in memory.

Narrative Reflection Defined

Deictic shift theories characterize absorption with a narrative as a lack of self-awareness, and a presence in the world of the story. The self and the real (nonstory) world are important components with which to understand the influence of a narrative on the reader beyond unconscious processes and provide the bases to match stories (Fisher, 1984) across these two worlds.

We draw from several literatures to introduce the construct of reflection: as a process by which a story receiver interprets the stream-of-consciousness experience (Liberman, Gaunt, Gilbert, & Trope, 2002) and to understand and to create meaning from that experience (Oliver, 2008) in ways that influence decisions and views of our real world (Fisher, 1984). We define reflection as processes by which the story receiver interprets and links the story message to their own world. This process may result in a reframed understanding of the receiver’s past or application of the story message to current views or acts in one’s world. The process of reflection includes two facets.

Decode

Work in discourse processing indicates comprehension of a story can occur on several levels (Taylor & Zwaan, 2009). For example, a reader of the sentence “she dropped the amphora” may not know that an amphora is a specific type of Greek vessel, but may still come away with an understanding that a character’s action resulted in the item falling. This level of understanding may be sufficient to construct a loose understanding of the story model. Deep comprehension, on the other hand, entails understanding the global message or the point of the story, is the most difficult to construct, but is related to acceptance of the story message and subsequent belief influence (Graesser et al., 1994).

This process is more likely to happen subsequent to the story-ending (i.e., post absorption) for two reasons: Such
deeper inferences require higher levels of cognitive resources (Zwaan & Brown, 1996), and the cognitively demanding process of constructing a mental story model no longer absorbs resources. Second, the persuasive message of a story is embedded in a goal-action sequence, and it is often only upon learning the sequence termination (how a story ends) that understanding the message’s persuasive subtext is possible.

Externalize
In addition to decoding, reflection occurs through a process of incorporation or reconciling narrative implications with one’s view on the world. Beliefs implied in the story are accepted as valid in the real world – are externalized – by matching the model of the story with the individual’s mental model of their real world (Larsen & Seilman, 1988).

The relationship between absorption (and exposure to information in the story world) and externalization (comparison with individual’s real-world mental model) is moderated by the personal relevance of story content. The higher the personal relevance, the more likely the information gained through absorption will influence the real-world mental model, and, subsequently, the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of the self in the real world. Prentice, Gerrig, and Bailis (1997) provide empirical support for this moderated relationship: Individuals invest cognitive resources and reflect more deeply in a fictional narrative when the setting is local (i.e., more personally relevant) than remote. This perspective is consistent with the model proposed by Dunlop, Wakefield, and Kashima (2009) in which absorption into a narrative changes narrative-related beliefs and intentions through self-referent responses.

Other authors have found a similar pattern of influence in which causal relationships in a narrative are considered with relation to, and accepted as applicable to, the reader’s world, which then influence persuasion-related outcomes. For example, Tal-Or and colleagues (2004) found manipulations to a narrative text only enhanced persuasion when they highlighted a self-oriented, controllable behavior.

In the context of consumer processing, advertisements that evoke narrative processing influence audiences through self-brand connections, which occur as consumers connect incoming narrative information to personal stories and self-relevant knowledge, leading to enhanced brand attitude and behavioral intent (Escalias, 2004).

As demonstrated by narrative persuasion work in health communication (de Wit, Das, & Vet, 2008; Dunlop, Wakefield, & Kashima, 2008, 2009) externalization may also take the form of assessing perceived risks associated with a character’s actions in a narrative. Implications of risk in the narrative world must be translated into risk for the reader. For example, a woman who reads a narrative about breast cancer may perceive the risk and danger experienced by the character, which may influence her personal risk and the likelihood of seeking mammography.

In addition to influencing behavioral intention or present views on the world, reflection can extend to or alter how one views past experiences, recasting their meaning. Larsen and Seilman (1988) describe a process of personal resonance in which textual elements remind readers of people or places they have encountered, which frames later elaboration; that is, a story can prompt an individual to view a past experience as an instantiation of action sequences depicted in a story, and cause one to reinterpret past events to be consistent with the story. For example, a story about a star athlete who was bullied earlier in life may remind a story receiver about a time he, too, was bullied, and the corresponding realization the experience prompted determination to achieve in his own world.

Reflection: What It Is Not
Narrative reflection overlaps with some processes described in the literature, but is distinct in important ways. Reflection is similar to the construct of self-referencing (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1989) in that both modes of processing evoke the self. Self-referencing, however, is a broad process that can occur in response to analytical processing (e.g., personal relevance enhances central route processing in the elaboration likelihood model; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and can take the form of recalling self-relevant facts (e.g., “I am Caucasian”). Narrative reflection entails the story as the starting point (deictic return to real world), and then an incorporation of relevant aspects of the story into our own world to create meaning. It is elaboration on narrative content, but is specific in both form (the story content elaborated on) and function (e.g., as a path of return from the story world). Narrative reflection is a consequence of, and occurs subsequent to, the deictic shift into the story world. The nature of narrative processing (drawing inferences from actors engaged in goals, and then extrapolating to one’s life) facilitates reflection in contrast to the more formal logical processes to create meaning from argument-based messages.

Reflection and Persuasion
In processing a narrative, a reader first invests cognitive resources to create a mental model, then to create meaning (i.e., decode and externalize the message), and subsequently to accept the message (i.e., be persuaded). Reflection is a process that is an outcome of a deictic shift and absorption, and antecedent to narrative influence. Cognitive resources devoted to building a mental model of the story
world during the deictic shift become available to create the message meaning upon reaching the narrative conclusion (Zwaan, 2015). A more substantial deictic shift into the narrative, and away from the self, results in a more textured, richer mental model of the story world, and a corresponding higher level of reflection necessary to match and integrate this more textured model with the individual’s mental map of their real world; that is, the further one shifts from one’s initial perspective, the greater the significance of that experience to the receiver, and the more reflection needed to reconcile the mental models of the story and real worlds. Conversely, a superficial deictic shift will result in a more simplistic mental model, less narrative absorption, less need to reflect on the story experience, and, subsequently, less change toward story-consistent beliefs.

Specific Aspects of the Deictic Shift Back

As discussed previously, the ability of narratives to provide experience to story receivers that mimics real-world experience, emotional engagement, and suspension of disbelief are three fundamental features of a deictic shift and absorption into the narrative. These features have a direct correspondence with reflection.

A deictic shift makes the narrative experience feel real. Recent work highlights that these experiences endure in long-term memory, can be related to situational representations formed previously, and can be reactivated at later stages to inform action (Zwaan, 2015). A story receiver may find herself in a scenario similar to one encountered in a narrative world: For example, she may need to make a decision about how to fire an employee. During reflection on the narrative, the story receiver may match the narrative and the current scenario on relevant dimensions (e.g., similar goal of letting the employee down easily), and extrapolate from the narrative experience to inform current action (e.g., it is a good idea to fire employees on a Friday). Thus, a vicarious, story-world experience can influence action in the real world. As Bilandzic and Busselle (2011) indicate, an appropriate means to assess the value of a narrative is not whether events did happen, but whether they could have happened, suggesting the importance of congruence and relevance of the narrative to the real world.

Second, deictic shift entails the experience of intense emotions. Oatley (1999) suggests empathy (emotional simulation) helps readers to understand characters in the narrative world and enables them to better understand people in the real world. Caputo and Rouner (2011) and Chung and Slater (2013) found adoption of a stigmatized character perspective in a narrative influences the readers’ subsequent treatment of that group; that is, reflection on the narrative allows the story receiver to connect the shame felt by the protagonist in the story world (and vicariously experienced by the receiver) with the likely experience of that stigmatized group in the real world. If the story receiver had treated this group in an insensitive way in his past, the emotional knowledge gained through a deictic shift into the character’s perspective and then back into his world view may affect his future real-world actions.

Finally, deictic shift results in less thoughtful resistance to a narrative because the cognitive resources needed to construct the story world reduces one’s ability to counter-argue. Fisher (1984) states a reader only begins to question the coherence of a story when a component of a narrative provokes suspicion, and reflection on the story meaning also remains less critical unless there is a stark mismatch between the story meaning and the reader’s real world.

Engagement in a storyline renders personal attitudes less accessible, and story receivers regain access to their pre-message attitudes following absorption in a narrative and during reflection. As described previously, reflection is an integrative process, in which the reader contrasts the mental model of the story world and the reader’s real world and attempts to reconcile differences between these two models. Reflection does not necessarily lead to complete acceptance of a story’s message (i.e., not all beliefs implied by a narrative are accepted) but rather a revision of the reader’s viewpoint based on an integration of the mental model of the narrative and the corresponding mental model of the reader’s world. The specific form of this integration is an area for future research.

Outcomes of Narrative Persuasion

The effect of narratives is robust across substantive areas and multiple persuasion-related outcomes. Recent meta-analyses have summarized much of the discipline-specific research on the relationships between deictic shift and persuasion-related outcomes. We will expand on this work and highlight how reflection can contribute to the interpretation of these results.

In health communication, Zebregs, van den Putte, Neijens, and de Graaf (2015) found narratives have a stronger influence on behavioral intent than does statistical influence (while the latter is more likely than the former to influence beliefs and attitudes). The authors explain this finding by postulating behavioral intent is more complexly determined than beliefs and attitudes. That is, emotion and social influence affect behavioral intention, and narratives are more likely to convey emotional and social context than statistical information; thus, a narrative is more likely to influence intent than beliefs or attitudes. The mental model created to represent a narrative will incorporate...
more details and be more textured than statistical information, and this substantial mental model is more likely to match the individual’s real-world mental model of intention determinants rather than the simplified model constructed to represent the determinants of beliefs and attitudes.

Zebregs and colleagues (2015, p. 283) also describe a matching process similar to reflection to explain why a story receiver may reject certain information: “For instance, after reading the narrative evidence in the study about hepatitis B infection that we referred to (de Wit, Das, & Vet, 2008), the reader might see himself as very dissimilar to Remco, the character in the narrative.” The reader may detect a mismatch between the story model and his own world during reflection, and be less influenced by the story message.

In their meta-analysis, Shen, Sheer, and Li (2015) found narrative messages influenced disease prevention and detection behaviors, but not cessation of addictive behaviors. The authors explain this difference by suggesting addictive behaviors may be resistant to any type of influence. We suggest another mechanism is operating: Such (addictive) behaviors have been performed very frequently by the story receiver in the past, resulting in a well-established mental model associated with this behavior, which is less likely to match with or be influenced by the story world. The prevention and detection behaviors may be less familiar to story receivers and allow the mental model created to understand the narrative to be integrated with the less well-formed mental model associated with the specific behaviors in the reader’s real world.

The meta-analyses of Zebregs et al. (2015) and Shen et al. (2015) compared the relative influence of narrative and control (statistical or argument-based) messages on persuasion-related outcomes. By contrast, Van Laer and colleagues’ (2014) meta-analysis focuses on transportation into a narrative, and how this mechanism influences persuasion-related outcomes. They found narrative transportation had significant, positive effects on affective responses (story-consistent feelings), narrative thoughts (representations of the story’s structure, characters; thoughts to construct a narrative from a story), beliefs (perceived truthfulness of story-consistent beliefs), attitudes (how desirable they find the story plot and how truthful they perceive it to be), and story-consistent behavioral intention; in essence, the more one shifts into the narrative, the stronger the influence of the narrative on the receiver. Our proposed conceptualization of narrative persuasion provides insight into how engagement with a story leads to the articulated outcomes. For example, Van Laer and colleagues define story-consistent belief as perceived truthfulness of beliefs implied by the story. That is, is the relationship implied in the story world valid in the real world? Reflection serves as the matching or assessment process through which this validity is assessed.

### Moderators of the Relationships in the Narrative Persuasion Process

The current work conceptualizes narrative persuasion as a process of deictic shift and absorption, which leads to a process of reflection, which then predicts persuasion-related outcomes. Minimal empirical work has examined moderators of postabsorption processes and persuasion-related outcomes. We now discuss potential moderators of these individual paths to enrich the nomological network between the deictic shift and reflection.

#### Need for Cognition

Need for cognition (NFC; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) reflects the extent to which individuals are inclined toward effortful cognitive activities and has been established as a meaningful individual difference in argument-based persuasion. Green and Brock (2000) emphasized that transportation and cognitive elaboration are distinct processes and demonstrated NFC does not predict transportation or story-consistent beliefs. Other researchers, however, found that NFC does influence the narrative persuasion process (Braverman, 2008; Thompson & Haddock, 2012). The process of reflection may account for these differences: NFC may moderate the relationship between transportation and reflection. Absorption in a narrative may have a stronger relationship with reflection for individuals higher in NFC because they are more likely to be motivated to invest cognitive resources to reflect on the relationship between the story world and their real world.

#### Personal Relevance

Individuals differ in the extent to which they perceive a narrative as personally relevant. They may have past experiences similar to those depicted in the story, or they may note direct applicability of story aspects to a situation in their own life. Personal relevance is likely to strengthen the relationship between absorption in a narrative and reflection. When a narrative is personally relevant, the relationship between absorption into the narrative and reflection is likely to be stronger than when personal relevance is weaker. As with NFC, personal relevance may enhance the motivation to elaborate on the relationship between the mental model of the narrative and the individual’s real world.

#### Goal or Motivation to Engage

Individuals motivated by hedonic (i.e., enjoyment) or eudemonic (i.e., deeper meaning) goals may have similar
experiences when creating a mental model of the narrative, but the different goals may influence persuasion after the story has been processed. Hedonic processors are more likely to view the story experience as an end in itself, and less likely to engage in reflection because they have likely attained their goal of enjoyment. Eudemonic processors are more likely to engage in interpretation and reflection following the story experience because of their desire to obtain deeper meaning from the story. Motivation to engage can be instantiated as an individual difference (Oliver & Raney, 2011), or by differences in narrative structure or content. For example, a story described as one in which people can obtain “deeper, meaningful lessons” may be more likely to be reflected upon than one described as “light entertainment.” The context can also influence one’s narrative processing goals; a story told as part of an employee training workshop should engender more reflection than the same story disseminated through an entertainment-based magazine.

Story-Ending Valence

In addition to story-receiver-based influences, elements of the text can moderate the relationship between absorption and reflection. For example, research suggests individuals spent more time processing negative than positive endings (Egidi & Gerrig, 2009). Negative information evokes scrutiny, which is consistent with work on a negativity bias (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Thus, absorption in a narrative may have a stronger relationship with overall reflection on the narrative when the ending is positive because more effort can be devoted to holistic interpretation of the narrative. Further, a mood maintenance perspective (Cohen & Andrade, 2004) might suggest story receivers of a highly absorbing story who read a narrative with a positive ending might engage in additional elaboration about the story to maintain the positive emotional state.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The persuasive influence of narratives has long been leveraged by entertainers, orators, and by humans in daily interaction. Research interest has grown alongside this intuitive understanding of their effectiveness, and the field of narrative persuasion has developed to provide theoretical insight into this process. Concurrent growth across multiple fields has resulted in research on narrative influence in distinct directions. One stream of work emphasizes consequences of the deictic shift into a story and an absorbed way of processing a narrative. Acceptance of story-consistent beliefs is viewed as resulting from this shift, is characterized as non-conscious, and is a collateral effect to this shift. Another research stream emphasizes how narratives are fundamentally understood with reference to the self, and sought as a source of meaning to be applied to one’s life. The current work highlighted the relationship between these two broad processes as a causal sequence – specifically, losing oneself (deictic shift) leads to a process of creating meaning from this experience (reflection) – and as antecedent to narrative persuasion. The aim of this work was to provide a conceptual framework bringing together these perspectives, and suggesting new avenues for future empirical work.

The first era of narrative persuasion research demonstrated that narratives evoke processing that differs from argument-based messages and can lead to comparable (or better) levels of persuasion than their argument-driven counterparts. Future research that disentangles the deictic shift, absorbed processing of a narrative, and reflection will provide important insight into how specific facets of these processes contribute to persuasion. The preponderance of work on narrative persuasion conceptualizes a shift into a story as unidimensional, despite acknowledgement that this process is multifaceted (e.g., cognitive and emotional engagement, imagery, attention). The limited research that has disaggregated the facets of this shift finds emotion (specifically, the experience of negative emotion) to be an important predictor of persuasion-related outcomes (de Graaf et al., 2009). For example, de Graaf et al. (2009) asked participants to read a story about an individual seeking political asylum. Each facet of narrative engagement was measured to explore which one(s) mediated the relationship between reading the story and endorsement of message-consistent attitude. Only emotional engagement predicted attitude toward asylum, although imagery, attentional focus, and emotional engagement were elevated compared with a control group. Future work should continue to disentangle the relationships among these facets of engagement and how they influence features of reflection (i.e., decode and externalize).

Specific facets of the matching processes between the story world and real world that occur during initial processing of a narrative (akin to Fisher’s notion of assessing narrative fidelity) remain to be further articulated. What are critical dimensions for assessing correspondence, and does this matching process use a compensatory (i.e., correspondence on certain dimensions can make up for lack of correspondence on other dimensions) or noncompensatory (i.e., a lack of correspondence on a certain dimension renders the model invalid) decision rule? Do certain conditions (e.g., genre of a text, modality) change the nature of how matching is assessed? And finally, what are the dimensions of initial match that are most important to guide extrapolation or future behavior? For example, is a narrative
featuring a character who shares similar goals (future correspondence) with the reader more influential than a narrative featuring a character who has a similar background (past correspondence) to the reader?

The current work identified two mechanisms of narrative persuasion. We do not propose that all persuasion occurs through the process of reflection; for example, other, less conscious, processes such as associational learning and behavioral modeling may occur and result in persuasion. Efforts to explore other processes in narrative persuasion contribute to a broader goal of developing a more comprehensive framework of narrative influence, and may provide insight into a broader, unified perspective on persuasion. Research examining dual-route processing and persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) provided an initial contrast to better understand narrative persuasion (through demonstrating that a different process could lead to change of the same persuasion-related outcome variables). An effort to further articulate processes of narrative persuasion may aid in identifying commonalities across frameworks and result in a more comprehensive model of persuasion.

References


