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Is Britain a force for good? Investigating British citizens' narrative understanding of war.

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Abstract

It is commonly assumed in the foreign policy literature that narratives are uniquely persuasive and thus integral to obtaining public support for war. Yet empirical research on 'strategic narrative' is often vague on both the concept of narrative and how it persuades. Moreover, the stories publics use to interpret war are rarely examined. This paper offers a novel approach to studying 'from the ground up' the war stories of individual British citizens. It examines public interpretations of war through emplotment: the way people select and link events to create a coherent story. Examining the wars people include and those they silence, it illustrates how a diverse range of citizens morally evaluates Britain's military role, be it as a *Force for Good*, a *Force for Ill* or a country *Learning from its Mistakes*. In doing so the paper offers an alternative methodological approach to studying how individual citizens understand war.

Introduction

A prevalent assumption within contemporary foreign policy is that persuading publics to support war requires a compelling 'strategic narrative' (Freedman, 2006, 2013, Antoniades *et al.*, 2010, Halverson *et al.*, 2011, Simpson, 2012, De Graaf *et al.*, 2015). Theorists assert that as *selective interpretations of the past, present and future designed to achieve political objectives through persuasion*,[1] strategic narratives could achieve a variety of objectives, from influencing great powers (Antoniades *et al.*, 2010), sustaining alliances (Miskimmon *et al.*, 2013), defeating military opponents (Freedman, 2006, Simpson, 2012), preventing radicalisation (Archetti, 2013), to securing domestic support for military interventions (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011, De Graaf *et al.*, 2015). Strategic narratives' apparent persuasiveness hinges on the assumption that storytelling is the most natural form of human communication and the primary way humans make sense of the world (Fisher, 1984, Polkinghorne, 1988, Barthes and Duisit, 1991, Bruner, 1991). This reflects a broader trend in which narrative is seen increasingly as a communication panacea (Salmon, 2010), the key to 'soft' power in the 21st century (Roselle et al., 2014), and even the 'foundation of all strategy' (Vlahos, 2006).

Yet despite a burgeoning literature on the subject, understanding of the strategic utility of narrative remains incomplete. Empirical research often lacks methodological clarity on what constitutes narrative or how it should be studied, despite its perceived importance in securing domestic support for war. Many authors conceptualise narrative clearly but then empirically

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[1] This definition is strongly influenced by Miskimmon *et al.* (2013, pp. 5-8).

treat it no differently from any other unit of discourse. This makes claims that it possesses particularly persuasive properties hard to sustain.

Furthermore, empirical research is lacking on how publics interpret the stories governments tell them, or how citizens construct their own. Most research on the subject has examined the strategic narratives states should project,[2] or sought to correlate them with public opinion polls (Ringsmose and Børgesen, 2011, De Graaf *et al.*, 2015). In Britain, the use of narratives to secure public support for war rests on a body of quantitative research that has so far generated contradictory and inconclusive data regarding attitudes to military interventions. Authors disagree on whether the British public are more isolationist or internationalist (Mludzinski, 2013, Rogers and Eyal, 2014, Raines, 2015); prefer a foreign policy based on ethical considerations or national interests (Davies and Johns, 2010), or whether their views are dependent on the context of a given conflict (Johns et al., 2012). Moreover it is unclear whether this context-dependency reflects a public possessing a nuanced understanding of war (Hines et al., 2014, Towle, 2010) or one whose unstable opinions fluctuate based on how politicians and the media frame a given conflict.[3] Where these authors concur is in describing public attitudes in terms such as confusion, contradiction, ambivalence and incoherence (Davies and Johns, 2010, Knight et al., 2012).

Meanwhile, as these theorists disagree over what citizens think and therefore how they might be persuaded, an alternative area is left uninvestigated: the stories told by individuals

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[2] For early examples, see Kaldor, M. *et al.*, 2007. Human Security: A New Strategic Narrative for Europe, *International Affairs*, 83: 2, 273–288; Porter, W., and Mykleby, M. [Mr. Y]. *A National Strategic Narrative*. Woodrow Wilson Centre for International Scholars, Available from: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/A%20National%20Strategic%20Narrative.pdf [Accessed 20 September 2016].

[3] Most research arguing this has been based on the US rather than Britain, but for the essense of the debate, see Drury, A. C., Overby, L. M., Ang, A. and Li, Y., 2010. 'Pretty Prudent' or Rhetorically Responsive? The American Public's Support for Military Action. *Political Research Quarterly* 63 (1), 83–96; Reifler, J. et al. 2012. Prudence, Principle and Minimal Heuristics: British Public Opinion Toward the Use of Military Force in Afghanistan and Libya. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 16 (1), 28–55.

themselves. This represents an important omission, since the persuasiveness of strategic narratives theoretically rests on their ability to 'resonate' with audience understandings of the world (Freedman, 2006, Castells, 2011).

This research rests on two arguments. First, to understand how narratives persuade requires a clearer distinction between narrative and other modes of discourse. To understand how to use stories strategically, it is necessary to separate what is a story and what is not. Second, if narratives are considered a primary strategic tool to legitimise war, those told by target audiences should be better understood. This requires a methodological approach that moves beyond public opinion, examining not just what people think but *how they narrate*. Additionally, before constructing narratives to appeal to public values, it is worth examining the pre-existing stories individuals tell so that they can inform the construction process.

To that end, this study adopts an empirical approach that separates narrative from other forms of discourse, examining 'from the ground up' the stories told by a diverse range of British citizens about their country's role in war. The first section sets out the benefits of this approach through a critique of the existing literature on foreign policy narratives. The second part outlines the data collection and sampling methods used. The final section presents a methodological framework to analyse how citizens use selective emplotment to make their war stories more coherent. As will be shown, the framework can be used both inductively and deductively, to either analyse how individuals emplot historical events to make claims about what Britain should do with its military in future, or as a guide for narrative formation.

The benefit of examining emplotment will be shown by exploring public interpretations of a core assumption in contemporary British defence policy: that Britain's military is a 'force for

good' in the world (Strachan, 2009, Ministry of Defence, 2010). This idea constitutes a core aspect of Britain's international identity, based on the myth that it is a morally exceptional nation (Roberts, 2007, Ritchie, 2008). Nevertheless, how *citizens* construct stories to portray Britain as a force for good (or ill) remains unexplored. By showing how similarly a diverse range of citizens highlight some of its past wars while silencing others, the study provides a fine-grained analysis of how people evaluate Britain's military role over time. The paper also illustrates the interrelationship between narrative, identity and memory, by showing how identity claims that Britain is a *Force for Good* today are based on selective interpretations of Britain's past. It also demonstrates how narratives can be used to argue. Narrative and argument are commonly seen as distinct rhetorical modes (Krebs, 2015). This study illustrates how they are often combined, as individuals use stories to make claims about who Britain is and how its military should act. Taken together, these contributions go some way to answering Drury et al.'s (2010, p. 83) call for more 'corroborative individual-level analysis' of how publics interpret the use of military force.

Narratives in foreign policy: conceptual issues

Existing theoretical and empirical research on foreign policy strategic narratives often fails to distinguish between narrative and other forms of discourse, despite assuming it to be uniquely persuasive. Generally, foreign policy authors' claims about what makes an effective strategic narrative reflect Fisher's (1984) paradigm, in which they should be structurally coherent and plausible accounts of events (narrative *probability*), but also resonate with individual experiences, beliefs and cultural values (narrative *fidelity*). Beyond this, though, it is often unclear what makes narratives uniquely persuasive.

For example, Casebeer and Russell (2005) and Simpson (2012) employ the Aristotelian rhetorical proofs of *logos, pathos* and *ethos*, arguing that effective strategic narratives need rational appeal (*logos*), emotional resonance (*pathos*) and moral credibility (*ethos*). Ringsmose and Børgesen (2011) and De Graaf et al. (2015) advance the literature further, identifying four elements of effective strategic narratives: clarity of purpose, including a compelling mission objective; the prospect of success; consistent communication, and the absence of competing counter-narratives. These studies rightly argue that these aspects make narratives more persuasive. However, each of them also applies to framing, explanation or argumentation. After all, any argument will be more persuasive if it is communicated clearly, consistently and doesn't face strong counterarguments. It will also be more persuasive if it combines rational, emotional and moral appeal. None of these features is unique to narrative.

Methodologically, researchers often start by claiming the unique persuasiveness of stories, but then do not appear to separate them empirically from other forms of discourse. For example, while De Graaf et al. (2015, pp. 1, 356) explicitly claim that strategic narratives are 'storylines' that are distinctly different from arguments or frames, they describe their concluding typology of narratives as a collection of 'argument types'. Hodges' (2011) thoughtful study of the 'War on Terror Narrative' is a rare exception in deploying linguistic narrative theories during analysis. However, he conflates narrative with discourse in the Foucauldian sense – a 'common language' that 'governs public discussion and debate' (p.7). Cawkwell (2015), in his impressively detailed study of British strategic communication during war in Afghanistan, describes narrative as 'the sum total of statements, justifications and rationales uttered by British officials over time' (p.143). From this perspective, narrative is 'everything politicians say', rather than specifically the stories they tell.

Arguably these contributions obscure any persuasive advantages narrative might have since they consider almost all discourse types as examples of 'narration'. This creates a paradoxical situation in which narratives are assumed to be particularly effective at influencing human cognition and behaviour, yet the mechanisms through which they persuade remain unclear. As Jacobs (2000, p.31) summarises, 'the narrative turn continues to win over social scientists... [but] what is sorely missing is methodological refinement: that is, the attempt to delineate specific narrative processes'. One of these processes – selective emplotment - is the focus of this paper.

Much of the confusion over how narratives are empirically treated stems from disagreement about what constitutes them in the first place (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012). The majority of studies define narrative extremely broadly, or alternatively, avoid defining it at all. A vast array of metaphors describe narrative in political discourse, including 'explanation', 'argument', 'description', 'discourse', 'frame', 'belief', 'vision', 'value', 'logic', 'truth', 'life', or even simply 'content' (Bruner, 1987, Hyvärinen, 2006, Riessman, 2008, Archetti, 2013). In political communication, the idea of 'controlling the narrative' effectively reduces it to a product of 'spin', a metaphor for 'message' or even 'news cycle'. As Riessman laments:

> In contemporary usage, narrative has come to mean anything beyond a few bullet points; when someone speaks or writes more than a few lines, the outcome is now called narrative by news anchors and even some narrative researchers. Reduced to little more than a metaphor, everyone has a 'story' (2008, p.4).

These vague conceptualisations detach the concept of narrative from the assumption that it contains elements that make it particularly persuasive. Defined so broadly, this uniqueness is lost. Claims that we are in a new 'narrative age' are meaningless if the term encompasses all types of text (Ryan, 2005, Salmon, 2010, p. 4).

The contention here is not that narratives are uniquely persuasive compared to other modes of discourse. They may be, but the empirical basis of this assumption is far weaker than is often supposed.[4] To better understand how persuasive strategic narratives might be, narrative must be defined more precisely. Studying it should ideally examine specific features that differentiate it from other modes of discourse. This is no easy task. Since most policy statements reference what has happened in the past (often the failures of the opposition) and what will happen in future if a given policy is followed, then arguably virtually all political discourse is narrative in nature (Jones and McBeth, 2010). But if this is true, the claim that it is a uniquely effective way of persuading publics to support wars has little foundation. Political discourse cannot *all* be uniquely persuasive.

Narrative is defined for the purposes of this paper as *a temporally, spatially and causally connected sequence of events, selected and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience* (Riessman, 2008, p.3). It is a socially constructed unit of discourse often identified (though not always possessing) a clear beginning, middle and end, involving actors, settings and plot (Burke, 1969, Aristotle, 1996, Ó'Tuathail, 2002, Bernardi *et al*., 2010, Corman et al., 2013).

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[4] There is a notable lack of empirical research on the relative persuasiveness of narrative and argument in the foreign policy literature. For useful reviews in the communications literature, see Allen, M., and Preiss, R. 1997. Comparing the Persuasiveness of Narrative and Statistical Evidence Using Meta-Analysis. *Communication Research Reports* 14 (2), 125–131; Kopfman, J., Smith, S., Ah Yun, J., and Hodges, A. 1998. Affective and Cognitive Reactions to Narrative versus Statistical Evidence of Organ Donation Messages. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 26 (3), 279–300.

Conventionally, a narrative might consist of a past that leads to a present that puts in place a possible future (Frank, 1995, Brockmeier, 2000, Davis, 2002). This often revolves around the resolution of conflict, starting with an initial situation, a problem that disrupts it, and a resolution that restores order (Todorov, 1977, Miskimmon et al., 2013).

This definition conflates narratives and stories, which some may find problematic. Nonetheless there exists a remarkable lack of consensus on the difference. Authors disagree on whether stories are more complex than narratives (Czarniawska, 2004) or vice versa (Bal, 2009), and on whether narrative is as small as two causally linked clauses (Davis, 2002, p.14), a collection of stories (Halverson *et al*., 2011), or as large as an entire discourse (Hodges, 2011). This paper's focus on emplotment is common to narratives and stories while differentiating them from other forms of discourse. Consequently its approach follows Krebs (2015) and Riessman (2008) in considering the two interchangeable.

Differentiating narrative and non-narrative text is not always straightforward either. The lines between different modes of discourse often blur. In speech, narrative can be incomplete or interspersed with other modes of communication such as argumentation (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos, 2000). Narratives may not always contain all the elements outlined above, though the more that are present, the more 'story-like' a unit of discourse will appear, and the more 'narrativity' it can be said to possess (Carranza, 1998, Abbott, 2008). They may not always include detailed sequences of events. Instead they may be 'habitual' narratives, where events are used to support a general statement of how things typically are (Riessman, 1990). They may also be hypothetical, suggesting likely future outcomes if one policy is pursued and not another. Sometimes they are left entirely unresolved (Carranza, 1998, De Fina, 2009).

To summarise the argument, in order to establish how foreign policy narratives might resonate with public audiences, empirical research should more clearly differentiate narrative from other modes of communication. It should move beyond aggregate studies of public opinion and attitudes to examine citizens' war stories directly. This can be done through examining selective emplotment. Emplotment is the organising principle of narration. It represents the process through which individuals select, evaluate and order events to create stories (Jacobs, 2000, p.21). It is also integral to character development, as readers understand the nature of a story's protagonist from their actions. Narrative theorists have traditionally considered the ordering of events in *time* to be the most significant aspect of plot formation (Frank, 1995, p.55, Ricoeur, 1990). However, emplotment can be spatial as well as temporal (Baynham, 2006, De Fina, 2003). Wars, after all, take place in a particular time and place, shaping borders, states and nations.

Emplotment is an inherently selective process, just like any attempt to frame social reality. Importantly though, it can also make apparently unconnected events seem whole, creating a unified story around an overall message, moral or endpoint (Polkinghorne, 1998, Davis, 2002). In this way, narratives can provide a cogent and plausible representation of social reality with an authority that is actually based on obscuring significant portions of that reality (Cronon, 1992). This selectivity, more than factual truth, is a key aspect of narrative's potential persuasiveness (Czarniawska, 2004). Examining how individual citizens do this can shed fresh light on which wars people tell stories about, which they silence, and more significantly, how they believe the military should be used in future.

The way individuals emplot stories about British military history is also important because of the inextricable links between emplotment, collective identity and collective memory (Davis,

2002). Understanding who one is in the present cannot be meaningfully done without reference to the past. Wars provide some of the most traumatic but also glorious national experiences (Berenskoetter, 2014). Once enshrined in collective memory, these provide the mythological foundations of the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006). In this way, similarities in the way individuals narrate British military history can be seen as evidence of collective identity and memory.

However, the focus here is not simply about how people remember the past. It concerns how, consciously or subconsciously, people selectively appropriate some historical events while silencing others to make a given point about Britain, its military, and how it should be used in future. Policymakers use the same mechanisms when they draw on historical analogies and stories to advocate military interventions.[5] As Ringmar (1996, p. 455) explains, 'the narratives we construct about our state will specify who we are and what role we play in the world; how our "national interests" are to be defined, or which foreign policy to pursue.' If people tell a story in which Britain is a heroic *Force for Good* throughout history, they are likely to assume that military force can do good, and are therefore more likely to support interventions in future. A central aim here is to demonstrate a narrative-specific method through which the coherence of these stories can be analysed.

Methodology

The narratives analysed in this study were derived from semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of British citizens resident in England from non-military families. Since the research investigates *how* individuals tell stories, the most logical approach was to interview

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[5] See for example Khong, Y. F. 1992. *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

as diverse a population as possible and then look for commonalities. Sampling was therefore purposive, based on two core principles of qualitative research: range and saturation (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013). Stratified purposive sampling was used to ensure the broadest possible range of participants. This hybrid approach selects groups for variation across a given phenomenon but also provides sufficient depth to compare different groups meaningfully (Miles and Huberman, 1994, Teddlie and Yu, 2007, Bryman, 2012). Individuals were sampled based on age, gender, location and socio-economic classification. Recruitment occurred within rural and urban populations across England, including London, Birmingham, suburban Liverpool, a market town in Dorset and villages in rural Worcestershire and Oxfordshire. Voluntary participants were found through informants in organisations across the country, such as the state education system and the Women's Institute.

Sample size was determined based on the theoretical sampling principle of saturation. This involves interviewing until one is confident that the full range of possible responses has been elicited, and is typically associated with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Charmaz, 2006). Having initially estimated that 40 to 50 participants might be sufficient to reach data saturation, 68 participants were eventually interviewed, with 2 omitted as they were found to be active servicemen. The process resulted in a highly diverse sample of 66 individuals across the full range of the British adult population in terms of age (range 18 to 92 years), gender (n = 33 male, 33 female), and socioeconomic classification.[6] Sample diversity was also enhanced by numerous Welsh and Scottish participants.

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[6] The sample was in fact broadly representative of the British population in terms of gender and socio-economic classification according to the National Readership Survey ABC1/C2DE criteria. In terms of age, 18-24 year olds were slightly overrepresented compared to 25-34 year olds, and 55-64 year olds were slightly overrepresented compared to 45-54 year olds.

Interviews were conducted in as short a time frame as possible, between mid-October 2014 and mid-January 2015, in order to mitigate the effect of contemporaneous events. They lasted between about 30 and 90 minutes, depending on the knowledge and loquaciousness of each participant. While narrative interviewing could be described as semi-structured, it is generally more discursive and conversational than typical semi-structured interviews. Questioning was therefore kept open and flexible to allow a range of responses and to encourage storytelling.

Emplotment in public war narratives

To examine how citizens construct shared plotlines about Britain and war, this paper adapts an analytical framework constructed by Spector-Mersel in her studies of narrative identity formation (Spector-Mersel, 2011, 2014a). According to the framework there are six selection mechanisms individuals use, either consciously or unconsciously, to make a specific overall point with a story. Here the framework is applied to stories in which Britain, rather than the individual, is the central character. First, they *include* events that support the point of their story. They also use *sharpening* to add extra detail about events that are particularly significant, perhaps telling an embedded account about a given incident. They *clarify* the 'real' meaning of events might have meant something different previously.[7] Meanwhile they *omit* events deemed irrelevant to the story and *silence* potentially contradictory events. They might also *flatten* the significance of contradictory events by bringing them up to explain them away. Combining these methods enables an individual to construct a coherent narrative to support a given identity claim.

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[7] In Spector-Mersel's original framework, 'clarifying' was termed 'appropriate meaning attribution'. The adjustment is purely for stylistic purposes.

An acknowledged limitation of this framework is that individual elements of it are not narrative-specific. Argumentation, after all, is selective and involves highlighting supporting evidence and silencing contradictions. Consequently, *linking* was added to the framework to improve narrative specificity.[8] Clear causal and temporal linkages between events are a key aspect of what makes narratives more coherent, as well as being fundamental constituent of the concept itself (Davis, 2002). This addition created an augmented framework of seven selection mechanisms used by individuals to try and construct coherent narratives about Britain's role in war:

1. **Inclusion**: selecting facts that fit the identity claim being made.
Example: selecting wars to support the overall claim that Britain's military intervenes for the good of humanity.

2. **Linking:** establishing a temporal, causal or spatial relationship between events.
Example: causally linking victory in the First World War to the allied naval blockade rather than America joining the war.

3. **Sharpening**: emphasising specific aspects of the narrative that fit the identity claim being made. *Example: an embedded story emphasising atrocities conducted during a particular war as part of a story portraying Britain's wars as morally wrong.*

4. **Clarifying**: explaining what an event was 'really all about', as opposed to alternative, commonly assumed meanings. *Example: arguing that a war was not about natural resources but actually about defending democracy.*

5. **Omission**: not including events that are *irrelevant* to the point of the story.
Example: excluding wars where Britain was not obviously trying to help others in a story about British humanitarian interventions.

6. **Silencing**: not including events that *contradict* the point of the story. *Example: highlighting Britain's moral leadership in abolishing the slave trade but silencing the fact that it had transported more slaves than any other state.*

7. **Flattening**: selecting but telling little of events that may contradict the point of the narrative. These events may be condensed and receive minimal focus. Alternatively they may be mentioned to assert their insignificance to the overall story.
Example: bringing up British imperial violence to explain it away because Britain was comparatively more benevolent than other colonial powers.

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[8] This addition was strongly influenced by Baumeister and Hastings' work on the different ways social groups distort collective memory to maintain a positive image of themselves. See Baumeister, R. and Hastings, S. 2013. Distortions of Collective Memory: How Groups Flatter and Deceive Themselves. In Pennebaker, J., Paez, D. and Rime, B., eds. *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 277-294.

Identifying the way citizens use these emplotment mechanisms is more than a descriptive exercise. If the overall point of a story is not explicitly stated, as is often the case, the framework can be used to infer it inductively (Spector-Mersel, 2011). In this way it provides a grounded method to determine whether people use emplotment to make claims about national identity in a similar way. However, the framework can also be used in a more deductive sense, as a structural guide for how to use emplotment to argue. A policymaker may want to make a claim about Britain's military role in the world, and the framework indicates different elements to consider when constructing a narrative to support it. It is certainly a detailed process, and indeed the complexity of emplotment has led quantitative analysts of 'policy narratives' to avoid its study (Pierce et al., 2014, p. 42). But if emplotment is what distinguishes narrative from other modes of discourse, and effective strategic communication rests on coherent storytelling, then being able to analyse plot comprehensively is vital.

To demonstrate, the following section examines citizens' stories in response to the open-ended question 'if you were asked to tell a story about Britain's historical role in war and conflict, what story would you tell?' In particular, it analyses differing public interpretations of a seminal claim of contemporary British defence policy: that it is a *Force for Good* in the world. Across the sample, three distinct positions emerged on this issue, based on three different narratives. In the first story, Britain has always been a *Force for Good* throughout history, be it spreading democracy and good governance through its empire, defending Europe from fascism, or safeguarding the liberal order today. In the second account Britain progresses from being a destructive, exploitative imperial power, *Learning from its Mistakes* to use military force for the good of the world. In the third interpretation, Britain has always been a *Force for Ill*, fighting for the remorseless, selfish pursuit of territory and resources at

the cost of all in its path. People telling these conflicting stories have the same wars from which to construct their respective accounts. Consequently, a micro-analysis of emplotment can reveal how citizens try and make their interpretation more convincing.

Three caveats are acknowledged before proceeding. First, these narratives represent clear positions on whether Britain has been a *Force for Good* over time. Citizens' stories do not always correspond perfectly to such positions, often revealing considerable crossover and hybridity.

Secondly, while it seems reasonable to assume that a story that contains more of these emplotment mechanisms is more coherent, this partly depends on the context in which it is narrated. Multiple theorists have argued that accounts containing more narrative elements or 'story grammars' are more coherent (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012). More detailed narratives are also widely considered to be more engaging (Haven, 2007). Nonetheless, an individual may well omit information that they see as common sense, or that they assume the recipient already knows. If they are right, a more limited story may still seem similarly coherent to the recipient. Conversely, the most detailed, well-constructed story is unlikely to persuade a recipient if it contradicts their ideological view of the world. Again, the aim is to show how similarly people construct narratives to make shared claims about the rightness or wrongness of Britain's global military role. It is not to quantify how persuasive they are.

Finally, it is impossible to present text from over 50 hours of interviews in a single article without seriously compromising analytical depth. The analytical approach also requires stories to be kept intact where possible to show how the different emplotment mechanisms interrelate to create a coherent whole (Spector-Mersel, 2014b). Making sense of British

history as a whole differentiates narrative from formal argumentation, which presents inferences derived from general principles. Keeping narratives complete where possible is therefore vital to understanding the emplotment process in its entirety. Consequently, after initially explaining the general patterns of each interpretation, a limited number of detailed exemplars have been selected to illustrate the process in its entirety.

1. Britain the *Force for Good*

The first story is a tale of continuity in which Britain is portrayed as a transhistorical force for good. At its heart is the idea that Britain is a morally exceptional nation that has always acted for the good of the world. The plot of this story has a stable trajectory, in which Britain's actions have continually been morally just overall. Britain's past is summarised crudely as 'Empire' in the majority of cases, often without further detail. It is also portrayed as comparatively benevolent and a positive influence on the world. Thereafter, Britain's stand against Nazism during the Second World War is the most commonly cited example of Britain's moral military role. Since then, people emplot varying conflicts depending on individual knowledge, but they are framed in a way that focuses on the positive aspects of military intervention rather than the negatives.

This corresponds most closely to the government's framing of British foreign policy, which particularly since the Blair administration has claimed to be a responsible power with a moral duty to use its military to address international security threats (Ritchie, 2008). Admittedly few countries would want to portray their use of military force as anything other than morally just. Yet being a *Force for Good* constitutes a particularly important aspect of Britain's international identity. Indeed one participant argued that self-sacrificing Britain's 'unique moral stance' is precisely what draws it into conflicts it should stay out of. As Vincent (65+, Dorset) suggests, 'there are times when I think our conscience pushes us too far'.

Denise (25-34, Birmingham) exemplifies how people use narrative emplotment to support the general statement that Britain has always been a *Force for Good.* She tells a tale of a morally exceptional nation always trying to use its military to 'make the world a better place':[9]

> Denise: I think it's always been with good intentions. First and foremost, they've always had such good intentions. We've tried to help people. Initially going back all those years, with Germany, it was good intentions to help other countries with the immense problems that they had. You know, we didn't have to. We didn't have to go and do any of that, but we chose to. It's like with Iraq. We didn't have to go. We've never had to go as a country to do any of it, but we've always gone and supported and tried to make the world a better place, for want of a corny sentence. But that's always what it seemed to be about, is wanting to make it a happy world, liveable and safe for everybody. It seems that's what the country's tried to do. Unfortunately a lot of souls have been lost along the way.
>
> Interviewer: Do you think Britain's succeeded?
>
> Denise: … I think it has been successful. I mean obviously with the First World War and the Second World War, that was successful going back all that time. That was successful. Iraq, that seems to have helped the people. You know, obviously there are still conflicts underlying and things do still happen. It's like with Afghanistan. We've given them the tools to learn how to police themselves properly, how to… food, water, how to do all of that. So I do think it has been successful.[10]

Denise uses several emplotment mechanisms to support the claim that Britain has always been a 'force for good'. First she *includes* several events, such as the First and Second World Wars, Afghanistan and Iraq. A *link* is drawn between two events, with war against Germany said to be 'like Iraq' in that Britain didn't have to go and help other countries in either situation. Afghanistan is *sharpened* as she goes into more detail, explaining the specific benefits Britain's intervention has supposedly brought to locals, such as food, water and policing. This may or may not be factually accurate, and is a rather patronising assumption. More importantly though, Denise's interpretation is that Britain fights to help those perceived as disadvantaged. In an example of *clarifying*, she explains that Iraq 'seems to have helped',

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[9] Note that for the purposes of brevity, these otherwise complete stories have been abridged slightly with the text 'cleaned up', involving the removal of some pauses, repetitions and hesitations that are not considered to significantly alter their overall meaning.

[10] Full transcript available on request.

but by acknowledging that 'obviously there are still conflicts underlying', she demonstrates an understanding that others may interpret the Iraq war as one where Britain's involvement failed to prevent ongoing conflict. There is an element of *flattening* in this statement, which gives no indication of who might be responsible for the 'conflicts underlying'. In a further example of *flattening*, she admits that it is 'unfortunate that a lot of souls have been lost along the way', but without providing any more detail. The use of the passive voice here also leaves vague who is culpable for the 'souls' that 'have been lost'; the active statement that 'Britain killed soldiers and civilians along the way' would not fit the *Force for Good* narrative.

Denise's story resembles quite closely a 'habitual' narrative. It does not have a clear beginning, middle and end but instead explains a general state of affairs that is always the case. The wars are not linked in the sense of flowing from one to the other. Instead, they are individually linked to the causal thread that throughout history, Britain's intervention in wars is caused by its desire to help others. This general pattern provides the narrator with flexibility to emplot different events. If it is taken for granted that Britain is always a *Force for Good*, any event can theoretically be selected, and the positive aspects of it highlighted. This explains how the recent war in Iraq can be selected in support of the story, despite it being by far the war most often cited as unjust and unsupported in this study.

While the story lacks the conventional narrative elements of initial situation, plot disruption and resolution, it does imply a series of smaller stories where ordinary citizens have 'immense problems', perhaps humanitarian crises or political oppression, and time and again it is Britain that heroically steps in to resolve them. The narrative is cyclical in this respect. Projected into the future, it assumes that as new conflicts arise, it will always be Britain more than others that steps in to 'make things better'. It always appears to be Britain that 'seems to

get involved in every war waged around the world' (Nigel, 35-44, South Yorkshire). On the other hand, as Megan (65+, Oxfordshire) rhetorically asks, 'where are [the] other countries?'

The general assumption of Britain as a transhistorical *Force for Good* also enables the storyteller to exclude events that might not fit the narrative without compromising coherence. The clearest example is Denise not mentioning the Empire. Whether this was an *omission* through lack of knowledge or deliberate *silencing* requires interpretation. Both are possible. As Asari et al. (2008) note, Empire has often been conspicuously absent from British history curricula, so many younger citizens may have little knowledge of it. In contrast, older participants such as Leonard (55-64, Wales) and Neil (65+, Worcs) both cite proud moments at school of being shown the map of the world with 'all the areas of pink' Britain controlled. Nonetheless, since Denise refers to the Empire elsewhere in the interview, it can reasonably be asserted that it was *silenced* as it may not so easily support her *Force for Good* narrative. Another way other participants avoided the Empire was to begin their narrative more recently. As Peter (55-64, Worcs) began, 'if you limit the past to the 1900s rather than going back any further, we have a distinguished history of standing up for what was right and sacrificing ourselves as we should'.

While some omitted the Empire, most telling the *Force for Good* story deliberately brought it up. For other participants the violence perpetrated under Empire represents the most obvious source of evidence to counter the *Force for Good* narrative. Numerous participants thus clearly decided that narrative coherence would be more easily achieved by bringing up the Empire rather than ignoring it. That way they could *sharpen* focus on its positive effects or *flatten* violence and atrocity. Participants such as Vincent (65+, Lancashire) emphasised its 'tremendous influence on the world', including bringing 'democracy', 'parliament' and

'language'. Typically they *clarified* that the Empire was really only 'defensive' and about 'trade'. Meanwhile they *silenced* or *flattened* imperial violence as just 'the way things were back then' or as being less violent than other imperial powers. As Shaun (55-64, Dorset) claims, 'if it hadn't have been us it would have been somebody else, and I think the other empires of the time probably were worse than us. I mean the one blot on our copy book is slavery, but that's the same for everybody.' These discursive tactics deflect from imperialism's fundamentally discriminatory and illiberal nature by portraying Britain's empire as comparatively benevolent (Morefield, 2014). This contrasts with the following story, in which Empire is perceived negatively.

2. From pillaging outlaw to silver knight: Britain *Learning from its Mistakes*

A second public narrative identified across the sample portrays Britain not as a *Force for Good* throughout history, but as a once-violent power *Learning from its Mistakes* to become a more positive influence over time. The plot is one of linear progress from a violent imperial past, through a humanitarian present, to a future in which ideally war would no longer be necessary. If it were needed, it should be used only for the good of the world. It is a story grounded in liberal ideology, and its *telos* is a world of ever-increasing freedom, peace and prosperity. It is also underpinned by a metanarrative of growth and learning, broadly applicable to all human behaviour. Britain's intentions may always have been to try and be a *Force for Good,* but through 'immaturity' and 'clumsiness', it has made mistakes, using its military to inflict violence in its 'misguided' (Kyle, 18-24, London) and 'ill-thought out' (Lily, 18-24, London) drive to civilise. Still, over time it has 'grown up', realising that 'things can't be done quite like that' any more (Neil, 65+, Worcs).

The main difference from the *Force for Good* narrative is that the main focal point of Britain's past - the Empire - is evaluated negatively. Citizens *clarify* that it was not benevolent, but 'arrogant' (Bethany, 18-24, London) and 'aggressive' (Danielle, 35-44, London), involving military 'conquest and domination', 'grabbing resources' (Tim, 35-44, London), 'subjugating' (Kenneth, 55-64, Liverpool), 'bullying' (Florence, 55-64, Oxfordshire), 'exploiting' others and 'imposing our way of thinking' (Oliver, 18-24, London). To support their moral evaluations, storytellers tended to *sharpen* focus on the negative aspects of imperial wars. Creating concentration camps during the Boer war was a frequent example. Many people were vaguer though, referring to the violence involved in 'taking over countries in Africa' (Dennis, 55-64, Worcs) and 'how we dealt with the Chinese when they refused to trade' (Kyle, 18-24, London). That said, few mentioned specific British atrocities. This may reflect a lack of knowledge but also Leichter's (2012, p. 123) observation that 'because we want to have an acceptable view of who we are, there is always a temptation… to ignore colonialism and imperialism while praising one's cosmopolitanism and philanthropy'.

Having used its military for these 'cruel' and 'heinous' ends, the most common turning point in people's stories is the Second World War, when the country learnt to use military force for the 'greater good' (Tim, 35-44, London). Thereafter, Britain's wars have progressively become more humanitarian, 'policing' operations fought for the 'right reasons' (Tilly, 55-64, Worcs), including 'freedom' and 'democracy' (Sophie, 18-24, London), rather than being aggressive and exploitative. In Kyle's words (18-24, London), Britain, as the story's protagonist, is evolving from being a 'pillaging outlaw' to a 'silver knight' of the international community.

Ida (55-64, Liverpool) provides a typical example of how individuals use selective emplotment to construct the *Learning from its Mistakes* narrative:

> Ida: I think the story that you would tell would be that over the years we have, if you go back to Henry V and the Hundred Years' War and stuff, I think we've always had a certain arrogance about our warfare, that we would go and sort them out. And I think following things like the Crimean War when we might have picked up a few clues that wearing red into battle might not work, the Boer War where you suddenly realise that it's not the war you thought it was … I think over the years we've actually learnt. The First World War I found to be a horrendous waste of life, the cannon fodder and all the rest of it… it tears you up to think that people were just wasted, literally. The Second World War, a necessary evil and I think that our warfare altered from that. Normally we've gone into wars in order to make things better, and I do think our military story now is one where we're a little bit more circumspect. We're not quite as gung-ho as we used to be, and also not quite so arrogant, as we've learnt a few very hard lessons. And as long as those lessons remain learnt, we can use war to achieve what war needs to achieve.
>
> I'd like to think that Britain was more of a mediator, able to pull people together, able to say 'look guys, let's look at it this way'. And also to be strong enough to admit frailty, because that's the difficulty. With anything you do, you have to be able to say 'erm no, we've made some huge mistakes'. And to be able to pull people around the table and say 'let's talk'. I think Britain should be able to mediate because we did an awful lot to solve conflict in the past, and we should have that sort of memory.'

While Ida's story begins with the Hundred Years' War, the Crimean, Boer and First World Wars are *included* and *linked* together by a narrative trajectory of progress over time. They are also causally linked by the claim that Britain's motivation in going to war has always been to 'make things better'. However, Ida also *sharpens* focus on specific aspects of each war, such as Britain's arrogance in strategy, tactics or belief in the ease of victory, along with its ignorance of the destruction wrought by war. Thereafter, the story shifts after the Second World War and Britain becomes less 'gung-ho', less arrogant. It learns to use its 'hard lessons' from centuries of war to 'make things better'. In future it would ideally become an international mediator rather than a military aggressor. Others expressed a similar hope that Britain might play a less violent but still leading role as a 'voice of reason' (Susan, 55-64 Oxfordshire), as 'arbitrators' (Kenneth, 55-64, Liverpool), 'advisors' (Felicity, 45-54, Dorset), and 'the ones who are consulted when things go wrong' (Faith, 18-24, London).

Ida clearly demonstrates knowledge of a range of conflicts, and elsewhere in the interview discusses several more, including Iraq, Afghanistan and the Falklands. Interestingly though, these wars are *omitted* in order to maintain the coherence of the overall story, possibly because it is less clear whether these conflicts fit within the progressive narrative of Britain becoming a *Force for Good* or not. A similar pattern was found in others who told this story. They *sharpened* focus on specific negative aspects of imperial wars while being vague about which recent wars show that Britain is becoming a *Force for Good*. This is arguably unsurprising, given the uncertainty over whether recent wars such as Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya have done more harm than good. In comparison, those telling the *Force for Good* narrative assume that *all* Britain's military actions are morally right, so they can select any conflict and frame it positively. This shows how emplotment and framing work together to support the underlying argument of a given narrative.

Two further points are particularly relevant to how the *Learning from its Mistakes* narrative reflects the importance of war to British national identity. First, even though the Empire is negatively evaluated, the story upholds Britain's sense of self or 'ontological security' through the idea that it has always *tried* to be a force for good; it just hasn't always succeeded. As Morefield (2014) argues, this excuses the illiberal violence of Empire by depicting Britain as a state with fundamentally liberal, humanitarian intentions. It is not simply cast in the role of villain but more of a 'clumsy giant' (Lily, 18-24, London) that tried to help but caused undue harm in the process.

Secondly, despite the rejection of imperial violence, this perspective still assumes that war can play a positive role in international politics – a key tenet of liberal interventionism. Far

from rejecting war outright, as Ida states, 'as long as lessons remain learnt, we can use war to achieve what war needs to achieve' and 'make things better'. This is corroborated within the academic literature, with Paris (2002) describing the British as a 'warrior nation' amongst whom military intervention is widely recognised as a legitimate and natural extension of policy. With echoes of Vegetius, Diane (18-24, London) further exemplifies this perspective when asked about the role of Britain's military: 'Erm… well overall … I think peace probably, but through fighting.'

3. Britain the *Force for Ill*: opposing narratives, identical tactics

The previous two narratives portraying Britain as a military *Force for Good* - at least in its intentions – dominated the sample. They were reflected in 57 out of 66 participants (84%) in relatively equal proportions.[11] This position was not universally accepted though. A small number of participants told the opposite story: that throughout history, Britain has always been a malevolent, economically exploitative *Force for Ill*. Again this is a narrative of continuity, but assumes all Britain's actions are morally wrong. This interpretation was significantly less common, with only 9 out of 66 participants (14%) viewing British military history in this way. The vast majority perceived Britain as a *Force for Good* at least in its intentions, if not always in practice.

The setting of the *Force for Ill* narrative paints a world in which humans invariably fight war for the naked pursuit of power, colonies, oil, money or the perpetuation of the arms trade. The plot is a continuous story of 'celebrated imperialism to this day' in which Britain is cast as

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[11] Narratives in which Britain was generally a Force for Good were coded in 37 out of 66 interviews (56%); Britain Learning from its Mistakes was coded in 34 (52%). The overlap is because both were coded in some interviews, reflecting the hybridity in certain participants' stories. Caution should be used when making generalisations from these figures though, as while the sample was broadly representative of the British population, it is not statistically so.

the villain, 'interfer[ing] as much as possible in other people's affairs' in pursuit of its own interests (Lewis, 18-24, London). A similar pattern is anticipated in future because of the causal logic that war is human nature. While ideally mankind would eschew conflict as the *Learning from its Mistakes* narrative hopes, this interpretation is more pessimistic. As long as vested economic interests exist, Britain will likely continue to use military force frequently.

Narrators of this story use the same emplotment mechanisms as those who see Britain as a *Force for Good*, but in reverse. They *clarify* that Britain's wars are really about economic gain while *omitting* or *silencing* any humanitarian benefits. Any claims that Britain is a *Force for Good* are *silenced*, or *flattened* by being brought up to be shown as hypocritical. This is done by *linking* wars together where Britain has intervened in one and not the other. Comparisons drawn are diverse and vary depending on individual knowledge. Examples include Britain's intervention in Libya but not Syria, Iraq but not Rwanda, even Afghanistan but not North Korea or Zimbabwe. The wars do not necessarily temporally coincide; their purpose is to highlight hypocrisy through the impression that Britain's decision to go to war is mainly influenced by 'where there's oil' (Mark 65+, Birmingham). Grace (55-64, Worcs) exemplifies this:

> Grace: I do wonder whether we ought to have done something in Zimbabwe. At the time we were going into Iraq, everybody was going on about the way Saddam Hussein was behaving, but there was Mugabe behaving in exactly the same way, but nobody really wanted to know about that because he hadn't got any oil.

Dan (45-54, Dorset) provides a more complete example of the *Force for Ill* narrative when asked to tell a story about Britain's historical role in war and conflict:

> Dan: If we go back to Richard the Lionheart, we were over there imposing on the Middle East. Now clearly there was no oil there at that time, but we wanted to impose our system on them. We look at the British Empire, when we went around the world and imposed our rule everywhere, and imposed our religion everywhere, and we imposed things on countries. We have oppressed, we have oppressed many, many times. … We go back to the British Empire and we went around the world and we

routed places, and stole their mineral wealth and all good things from them, and then buggered off. And I think it's very similar today. It's about cash.

Through selective emplotment, Dan gives the impression of continuity in Britain always going to war to impose, oppress, rout and steal, all ultimately for economic reasons. To create this transhistorical effect he *links* together the Crusades and the British Empire with conflicts today. *Sharpening* focus on the Empire for over half of the narrative, he *clarifies* that the pursuit of Middle Eastern oil is not a recent concern but actually part of a millennium-long process in which war is fundamentally exploitative. While he does not name specific recent conflicts, he had already *sharpened* focus on Afghanistan earlier in the interview:

> Dan: When you actually look at the detail of it, [war is] about controlling situations in terms of oil, mineral resources, etcetera, etcetera. You see the whole argument for, say, Afghanistan – we'll use Afghanistan – it's [apparently] about fighting against oppression of the people in that country… when we all know the routes for oil through Afghanistan are crucial for the West. … So yes, this idea that military intervention is all about freedom, it's not. It's not in my mind.

Having not mentioned a single positive aspect of Britain's wars in his initial account, here Dan *clarifies* that Afghanistan was not about 'fighting against oppression' but really about oil. By arguing that 'we all know' that, Dan implies that his perspective is part of a dominant narrative that forecloses any other interpretation of events. Afghanistan was supposedly not retaliation for 9/11, or about stabilisation, counter-narcotics or counter-terrorism, as the British government variously claimed (Cawkwell, 2015); it concerned oil pipelines that, incidentally, remain unbuilt. Again, the mythology of a story that makes history hang together predominates over factual truths about specific conflicts. The plausibility of the narrative hinges not on whether the pipelines exist but on the selective emplotment of past wars, framed to highlight exploitation and imperialism.

The most obvious wars Dan *silences* are the world wars, which might initially seem

surprising given their historical prominence. However, they are harder to fit into the *Force for Ill* narrative than other conflicts. There was, for example, a clearly defensive element to Britain's fight against Axis aggression in the Second World War. It is harder to argue that it was hypocritical, selective or imperialist. Indeed Britain's supposedly heroic stand against Germany in 1940 represents one of the founding myths of British moral exceptionalism (Croft, 2012). It is therefore easier to *omit* or *silence* it from this story.

That said, Dan later admits that the world wars were arguably morally 'purer' interventions. Other participants concur, describing Britain's role as 'justified' and 'something that had to be done', '[in] defence of our culture' (Lewis, 18-24, London). Yet rather than changing the narrative's trajectory, interviewees framed the world wars as exceptions. The logic that war is fought for economic gain remains. It is simply that the world wars saw a role-reversal where other powers were seeking territory and resources and Britain was defending. It may have 'done the right thing' in defending the world against German militarism, but it remained a *Force for Ill* overall.

Discussion

The preceding narratives illustrate several points about how British citizens understand their country's role in war. First, no two people are likely to use the exact same combination of conflicts in their accounts. Interviewees deployed a highly diverse range of wars, reflecting their varied knowledge and experience. Nonetheless, they told a limited range of stories when it came to *morally* evaluating Britain's military past. Three public narratives cast Britain either as a *Force for Good* throughout history, as becoming a force for good having *Learnt from its Mistakes*, or as a perpetual *Force for Ill*. Each draws heavily on myth, be it the

benevolence of Empire, that Britain is a uniquely moral actor, or that war is always about natural resources.

Since many examples contradict these generalised claims, citizens sustain them through selectively emplotted stories. People *include* and *sharpen* focus on events that support their chosen myths, frame them to *clarify* their 'real' meaning, *linking* some events together while *omitting*, *silencing* and *flattening* others. This imposes a linearity and continuity on British military history that oversimplifies a far more complex historical record. After all, the amount of 'good' that has come from British military interventions is evidently highly contested and varies from one war to the next. As another participant summarised, Britain has 'done a certain amount of good in the world and a certain amount of harm', sometimes being the aggressor, sometimes not (Grace, 55-64, Worcs). Significantly though, citizens with highly variable knowledge of war employ the same emplotment mechanisms to characterise Britain, its military and its international identity.

These shared narratives have important implications for how Britain justifies its wars. Of the three characterisations, the *Force for Good* narrative represents the most common in defence policy discourse. Those subscribing to it are generally more likely to support using Britain's military since they perceive its use as morally right and beneficial to Britain and the world. Taking British exceptionalism for granted, this story also resonates more strongly with nationalist sentiment. Still, it is only partially resonant with liberal thinkers who see the negative consequences of Britain's wars too. This suggests that persuading those who tell the *Learning from Mistakes* narrative to support military intervention may be easier if the government is willing to admit past mistakes. Many governments are often reluctant to do so, since attempts to present histories with greater balance between the good and the bad have

often resulted in nationalist backlashes (MacMillan, 2009). But since those who see Britain's military as a positive force in the world will likely support intervention anyway, the government may have more leeway in admitting past indiscretions than it realises. It would also appear more honest. As Lily (18-24, London) suggests, "would it be so bad to say "this is part of our history and it's good to face up to it?""

On the other hand, if the small proportion of participants seeing Britain's military as a *Force for Ill* throughout history were replicated nationally, then those opposing war would be better off focusing on the inefficacy of military intervention in achieving desirable political objectives rather than casting Britain as history's villain. Participants across the political spectrum appear to be uncomfortable with the idea of being citizens of a state that deliberately fights to exploit others. However, it is clear to see that recent Western military interventions have had limited success creating stability, democracy or even security.

This paper's focus on emplotment has potential implications for the way policymakers use historical references to justify or oppose future wars. In Western rhetoric it appears routine to justify prospective military interventions through comparison with the Second World War (Freedman, 2012). New enemies are 'like Hitler', and the 'Munich Analogy' offers a supposedly timeless lesson that early, decisive military intervention is preferable to appeasement (MacMillan, 2009). Recently both were used in advocating British action against Russia during the Crimean crisis in 2014 (Kralova, 2014) and when airstrikes against the Islamic State (ISIL) in Syria were debated in 2015 (Grace, 2015).

The appeal of using Britain's defence against Nazi Germany as the analogy of choice when justifying Britain's wars is understandable. It was the most frequently mentioned conflict in

this study, and is a 'foundational moment of contemporary Britishness' (Croft, 2012, p. 125). It also contradicts the claim that Britain is a *Force for Ill* that fights for selfish reasons rather than the greater good. Nevertheless, as shown here, public knowledge of war is extremely diverse, from Crimea to the Cod wars, not least because Britain has fought so many over the centuries. For those looking to portray Britain as a *Force for Good*, there is arguably no need to stick slavishly to 1940 as the only possible frame of reference that people understand. It might be better to think about how to use emplotment mechanisms to weave together a narrative of different conflicts that can each appeal to the different generations that experienced them. Rather than thinking 'which analogy should I use to describe this intervention', policymakers might instead ask 'of what story is this intervention a part?'

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has argued that the study of narratives of foreign policy and war would benefit from a discursive methodological approach based on selective emplotment. If researchers claim that narrative possesses unique properties, then these should be clearly empirically explicated. Arguably it is not sufficient to distinguish theoretically between narrative and other forms of discourse without showing how this distinction was put in practice analytically. If strategic narratives are indeed 'strategy expressed in narrative form' (Simpson, 2012, p. 184), studying them surely requires a focus specifically on narrative rather than discourse more generally. Conversely, if narrative subsumes all political discourse on an issue, it cannot meaningfully be claimed to be uniquely persuasive. When conceptualised so generally, this begs the question of how useful strategic narratives really are.

Here it is argued that strategic narrative should neither be uncritically exalted as a communication panacea nor dismissed by policymakers as an overly vague substitute for actual strategy. Instead, by defining narrative more precisely and examining features such as emplotment that differentiate it from other modes, its utility can be assessed more accurately. The formulation of strategic narratives would also be improved by empirical study 'from the ground up' of the stories target audiences tell. This would enable political actors to communicate more thoughtfully with their publics, whether promoting or opposing war.

As well as generally improving understanding of how citizens interpret war, the study's approach presents several opportunities to those studying foreign policy discourse. First, it provides a more nuanced perspective on how historical events are used to justify military interventions. There is undoubted value in studying the most frequent analogies and historical references used by political elites and correlating these with those used by citizens. Examining emplotment mechanisms is more nuanced though. It shows not just which events people select but how they are linked in the creation of a broader whole. It shows which they devote more attention to, which they silence, and how they explain those that contradict the moral of their story. It highlights some of the internal dynamics through which narratives can be made more compelling. In doing so it provides a micro-level alternative to discourse analyses that seek to identify the dominant narratives on a particular foreign policy issue at the macro level.

Studying emplotment can also illuminate the relationship between narrative, framing and argumentation, for none of these works in isolation. As has been shown, mechanisms such as *sharpening*, *clarifying* or *flattening* affect how events are framed within stories. Similarly, analysing emplotment can show how arguments are embedded in narrative, because

emplotment involves the causal linkage of events. For example, the causal logic of the *Force for Ill* narrative is that all wars are caused by ulterior, economic motives. The damage inflicted by them is thus intentional. By promoting this causal linkage over another, the narrative makes arguments about the nature of the world and by implication the rightness of future military interventions. As well as distinguishing between narrative and argumentation, a focus on emplotment facilitates a closer analysis of moments when the two combine.

Finally, narrative inquiry can enhance understanding of public attitudes to war by providing an alternative perspective to polls and surveys. It does not seek to identify specific attitudinal categories or statistically generalise these to the broader population. However, it can illuminate the full range of *how* a diverse range of citizens explain their attitudes to Britain's military role. It cannot determine the proportion of the population that support or oppose war, but it can illustrate how far people use the same war stories to justify their positions. It does not seek to generalise about public knowledge of war, but instead demonstrates the common-sense interpretations used to understand it. British public attitudes to using military force, previously described in the aggregate as confused and contradictory, may then appear more coherent and nuanced when respondents are given opportunities to tell their stories. The approach can also mitigate the recognised tendency for policymakers armed with simplified indices of public opinion to 'misread' public views as being more narrow-minded and unsophisticated than they actually are (Kull and Destler, 1999). Instead it provides an opportunity to understand better the reservoir of myths and popular assumptions that underpin what Hines et al. (2014, p. 1) describe as the British public's 'intuitive understanding' of war.

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