Thinking Outside of the Lunchbox:
Exploring Competing Narratives in the Corvallis 509J District School Lunch Policies

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Although I hold a BA in politics I never once imagined myself entering the policy arena. As a successful public affairs director in the private sector food industry I judged most of politics a mess of scoundrels and storytelling, although not that far off from my own vocation. The 2016 election season was a turning point for me; my “call to adventure” as Campbell (1949) might have put it. I applied to Oregon State University hoping to rewrite my personal narrative and fight for social justice. I have often said I see the world through stories, which I suppose explains my genuine delight at finding the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), the study of narratives in public policy theory. I’d found my tribe.

Attending graduate school was a choice made possible by my family. Above all I am grateful to my husband Joel and my son Will, for supporting me with love and laughter while I slaved away in front of a computer screen for months on end. Joel, thank you for sitting with me, listening to my incessant babbling, explaining complex philosophical arguments, and suffering my coffee and chocolate habit as I weeded through the literature.

I would also like to acknowledge my cohort in the Oregon State University School of Public Policy. In particular, I thank my committee chair, Mike Jones, for putting up with what must have seemed a constant barrage of questions about narrative analysis and never once telling me to “get a life”. Lastly, a public thank you to my high school language arts teacher, Mike Mote, who introduced me to Steinbeck and Edgar Allan Poe, kicking off a lifetime of narrative exploration.

The principles of the NPF necessitate a thorough analysis of the policy environment. The last two years have taught me how to turn my storytelling into science. Understanding the narratives, and establishing what’s working (and what isn’t), enables both the policymaker and policy advocate to tell better stories. Whether we choose to acknowledge them or not, narratives frame our worldview. While I admit I frequently lack brevity in sharing my own, I believe storytelling continues to empower my success in work, in parenting, in love, and in life. As Doctor Who put it, "I’ll be a story in your head, but that’s ok. We’re all stories in the end. Just make it a good one, eh, because it was, you know. It was the best” (Moffat, 2011).
ABSTRACT

At its inception in 1946, the United States’ National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was promoted as a success story; a boon for families navigating poverty, a means of buoying food prices by absorbing farm surplus, and a treatment for hunger in some of our country’s most vulnerable populations. Government subsidies were presented as a useful policy prescription, and commodities such as corn, soy, and canned foods were deemed acceptable nutrition for growing bodies.

Sixty years later school food policy narratives have changed. U.S. communities advocate for fresher ingredients and fewer preservatives, along with culturally relevant options, and food education that fits into a healthy and sustainable lifestyle. In the Corvallis, Oregon school district, conversation about school lunch has become contentious leading to lagging participation rates and a budget shortage. In the face of conflicting narratives, local stakeholders have engaged in activism and district administrators have sought community consensus.

Methodologically this paper employs qualitative methods. Leveraging a series of qualitative interviews and a brief survey with elite decision makers and district families, this research evaluates narrative variation among stakeholders and across cultural groups to determine what variation manifests in school lunch policies and what policy implications that variation has. Theoretically this research draws on the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) and Cultural Theory (CT) to identify the distinct perspectives shaping competing narratives in the district’s school lunch environment. Research findings are explored within the context of local school lunch advocacy efforts and in light of extant NPF literature.

Keywords: School Lunch Programs, Food Policy, Narratives, Corvallis, Oregon, Narrative Policy Framework, Cultural Theory, Qualitative Methods.
Thinking Outside of the Lunchbox:

Exploring Competing Narratives in the Corvallis 509J District School Lunch Policies

When it was introduced as the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act by President Harry Truman in 1946, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) was promoted as a success story; a boon for American families navigating poverty, a means of buoying food prices by absorbing farm surplus, and a treatment for hunger in some of our country’s most vulnerable populations. The program was billed as a frontline defense that could successfully deliver government commodities to anxious empty bellies. The narrative? Blameless victims saved from heartless villains like poverty and bad luck; things far beyond a child’s control. The hero? The United States Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Service. The moral of the story? That government subsidies present a useful policy prescription, and commodities such as corn, soy, and canned foods are acceptable nutrition for growing bodies.

Over the last few decades debates around school food have become increasingly politicized and protracted in the U.S. With research connecting the quality of school nutrition to childhood nutritional imbalances (P. M. Gleason & Suitor, 2003) and educational outcomes (Anderson, Gallagher, & Ritchie Ramirez, 2017), how and what children eat remains a key concern of parents and school administrators (Story, Kaphingst, Robinson-O’Brien, & Glanz, 2008; Taras, 2005). Some activists point to a “sinister food industrial complex” (Fisher, 2017) which they argue is to blame for a systematic failure to end childhood hunger, and a refusal to address income inequality and low wages as the true cause of poverty and hungry mouths (Fisher, 2017).
Over the past few years, Corvallis, Oregon district administrators and families have struggled to find common ground on which to build a flourishing school lunch program. Moreover, participation rates in lunch programs are down, resulting in strained budgets, which are tied to lunch program usage. In the face of conflicting narratives, local stakeholders have engaged in activism and district administrators have sought community consensus. This paper seeks to describe these conflicting narratives in the Corvallis school lunch program.

In the policy making environment, narrative is considered part of the bedrock on which humans make meaning of complexity (McBeth, Jones, & Shanahan, 2014). Assuming that humans experience the world through narrative, being able to describe competing stories will define how various stakeholders experience food and food policy. One approach to evaluating narratives in the policy environment is found in the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (McBeth et al., 2014). To assist the NPF in understanding what meaning is assigned to the narrative content of food stories within the Corvallis school district, this research further applies Cultural Theory (CT), a framework that captures belief systems commonly used by individuals to make sense of public policy.

This study applies the NPF and CT to the Corvallis school district lunch environment to describe the stories told by stakeholders in the Corvallis school district about their food experiences and preferred policy outcomes. Classic NPF narrative structures such as characters (including heroes, villains, and victims), along with cultural narrative content are identified through qualitative interviews, a brief survey, and a review of policy documents. Research findings are analyzed and then the implications explored within the context of local school lunch advocacy efforts and in light of extant literature.
Research Questions

In the fall of 2017, I joined a coalition of concerned Corvallis families, district employees, and staff for an informal focus group, the Forum on School Food. This meeting’s agenda covered childhood nutrition, participation in school served lunches, and concerns about current lunch menus and ingredients. My participation and observations from the forum were used to flesh out my research questions. In light of conflicting school food narratives afoot in the Corvallis community, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

(1) What are the school lunch stories of parent advocates and school lunch administrators in the Corvallis school district?

(2) How do these stories vary, and along what dimension can we usefully conceive of the variation?

(3) How do local food stories and policies compare to national school lunch program goals and priorities?

Preliminary observation suggests that disagreement in the Corvallis district appears to stem from questions about food quality and lack of program participation. An analysis of Corvallis stakeholder school lunch narratives should offer the community an understanding of what is fueling current controversy. In the face of complex policy stories, the NPF imparts a robust framework to make sense of the debate. To establish the setting in which school lunch food stories evolve, I turn now to a brief overview of the literature pertaining to the national and local food policy environments.
LITERATURE REVIEW

School Lunch Background and Context

The policy making characters at play in the school lunch context include the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) who oversees the policy, the US Congress who approves funding, and at the state and community level the school districts and nutrition services’ teams who implement the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) locally. According to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, school lunch programs meet “one-third of the nutrition needs of most children for the day” (“Benefits of School Lunch,” 2019), and the NSLP serves about 30 million children across the US, including over 303,000 in Oregon as of fiscal year 2016 (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2016). The baseline of a school’s NSLP service budget comes from the USDA who provides a debit account for purchasing foods from specific vendors. The reimbursement debit is based on the number of meals served in the prior year (Gibson, Newcombe, & Adair, 2018). Funds from cash purchases and grants allow schools to purchase from local vendors and other items such as fresh and local produce (Gibson et al., 2018). To be reimbursed for those children who qualify for free and reduced meals, district schools are required to meet federal guidelines from the USDA, by daily offering the five food groups/components of the federal school lunch policy. These include: a meat or (a meat alternative), a fruit, a vegetable, a grain bread component, and a dairy component. Children are required to take at least three of the five components (Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 as cited by Corvallis School District Nutrition Services Department, 2018a).

Advocates for “Healthier” School Lunch

Nationwide, communities are advocating for fresher ingredients and fewer preservatives, along with culturally relevant options, and food education that fits into a healthy and sustainable
lifestyle (Hanks, Just, Smith, & Wansink, 2012). Recent food policy also encourages (and also
requires) improvement of shelf and menu labeling (Kremen, Greene, & Hanson, 2004; Story &
French, 2004; USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2017c).

A common approach to developing healthier food selections is including more fresh
foods in meals (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2017b). The USDA reports that currently
42% of US schools actively participate in Farm to School programs which allow children to
learn about locally produced food, farms, and gardens (USDA Food and Nutrition Service,
2017b). These programs also help children develop healthy habits and a recognition of the
importance of healthy nutrition (United States Department of Agriculture, 2016). USDA also
grants schools access to fresher ingredients from farms and farmers markets through projects
such as the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (“Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program | USDA-
FNS,” n.d.).

The NSLP delivers regular meals to school children who represent the protagonists on the
receiving end of school lunch policy. Targeting food choices as a means addressing food
insecurity is nothing new, although the promotion of public school-based solutions for health
considerations like obesity has been gaining steam over the last decade: Successful programs
such as Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move program lead to the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free
Kids Act of 2010, a national policy which encourages better eating choices, improved labeling,
improved school lunch nutrition, and more exercise (Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, 2014;
The White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, 2010).

Buoyed by Michelle Obama’s educational campaign (The White House Task Force on
Childhood Obesity, 2010), overhauling school meals was made a high priority in the Obama
years, drafting concerned parents and even engaging celebrity support from organizers such as
Jamie Oliver (ABC News, 2009; Warin, 2011). In these recent food stories the status quo government programs, our former heroes, are now painted as the villains, and childhood obesity joins the ranks with childhood hunger as a policy rationale. Celebrity chefs like Jamie Oliver and political figures like the former first lady have become our new heroes, speaking of food revolution and advocacy, and uprooting norms in the context of school served nutrition. Under the first half of the Trump administration, however, the tide may be turning. Critics accuse the Trump administration of dismantling the Obama era initiatives, pushing back against regulation, and cutting school lunch budgets, a measure that will likely reduce funding for cafeteria equipment and orders for fresh fruits and vegetables (Brueck, 2018; Dewey, 2018; Severson, 2017).

**Measuring Benefits of Improved School Lunches**

Some schools have been able to successfully measure the benefits that come through improved meals at school. A 2009 study conducted by Gleason evaluated health metrics, including body mass index (BMI), of students participating in the NSLP (P. Gleason, 2010). This study emphasized the impact the federal nutrition policy has on what US students are eating, and their respective weight and nutritional intake (P. Gleason, 2010). While some of the results were inconclusive, Gleason’s research determined that students participating in the NSLP exhibit a lower intake of sugar-sweetened beverages, and consume a “lower percentage of calories” from low-nutrient energy-dense food (P. Gleason, 2010). Mixed methods research in California suggests that healthy food choices at school may represent a relatively low-cost policy solution for improving educational outcomes (Anderson et al., 2017). Anderson and his coauthors found that schools contracting with vendors providing healthier school lunch options have students that perform better on state tests. The study results advocate for nutrition policy
upgrades, and avoiding more expensive interventions, such as reducing class size (Anderson et al., 2017).

As discussions about childhood health and wellness have shifted toward food quality, childhood obesity remains distinctly relevant in the school nutrition paradigm. While Oregon does not currently have a monitoring system to measure health metrics in school-aged children, a 2013 research study of 2006 kindergarteners in predominantly rural Oregon communities determined that obesity prevalence was significantly higher in elementary grades 2-6, compared to children in kindergarten (Gunter, Nader, & John, 2015). Further, children who are “overweight at age five are four times more likely to be obese as adolescents” (Reilly JJ et. al., as cited by OSU Extension Service - Family & Community Health, 2016).

The Corvallis, Oregon School Lunch Policy Environment

The 509J school district Nutrition Services in Corvallis, Oregon serves a total population of 6,700 students operating on a $3 million annual budget (Gibson et al., 2018). Elementary schools in Corvallis have a total of 3,145 students of whom 1,275 are eating school provided lunch, or approximately 41% of elementary school children combined (Gibson et al., 2018). A purchased lunch in the Corvallis elementary schools costs $2.50, although 36% of the elementary students in the district qualify for free and reduced prices, permitting a reimbursement from the USDA when served (Gibson et al., 2018).

As mentioned above, in Corvallis 36% of the school district students are considered economically disadvantaged and may well be at greater risk of food insecurity (Gibson et al., 2018). These children automatically qualify for a free or reduced lunch (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2017a). In Corvallis only 75% of those who qualify for the NSLP free and reduced actually participate, with others choosing instead to bring meals from home (Gibson et
The Corvallis district is considered the fourth wealthiest in the state, with only three other districts having less participation in the free and reduced NSLP program. This puts the district at a disadvantage because they must rely on cash purchases of school lunches to augment their budget. Nutrition Services has asked district families and caregivers to collaborate on solutions to increase cash purchases.

The Corvallis School District nutrition service is an active participant in Farm to School programs, reporting that local fruits and vegetables have been included in school meals and salad bars for more than 20 years (Corvallis School District, n.d.). The district was also recognized in 2016 with the One in a Melon award for the state of Oregon (Betsy Hammond, 2016). This award is determined by community nomination and recognizes one school district in each state. Corvallis schools follow the Offer Versus Serve (OVS) provision, which intends to reduce waste by allowing students to decline some of the food offered. Corvallis, Oregon has also instituted wellness policies that set goals and measure school-centered activities that promote healthy nutrition, including “daily physical activity, and other health promoting behaviors.” (Corvallis School District 509-J, 2016; “Corvallis School District Health and Wellness,” n.d.)

The Food Narratives of the Corvallis Families for Healthier School Meals Coalition

Despite the school district’s inclusive efforts over the course of 2017-2018, communication about the Corvallis lunch program remains contentious. Local advocates have become increasingly involved in school food policy calling for an evaluation of the district menus. In early 2017 a coalition of families in the Corvallis School District (CSD) adopted the name, “Corvallis Families for Healthier School Meals.” Actively seeking healthier choices in elementary and middle school provided nutrition, the group outlined a variety of concerns about district sponsored meals and snacks. A pilot survey was conducted at the Forum on School Food,
a meeting and informal focus group consisting of Corvallis, Oregon community members, parents, district employees, and staff. The meeting’s goal was to flesh out the stories and perspectives of district families about school lunches and explore process improvement. Attendees pointed to an excessive number of convenience foods on the district lunch menu, along with chocolate milk which they feel presents a problem for sustainability due to excess trash and non-recyclables from serving size packages (Garfield Elementary School PTA, 2017). Data from the Garfield Elementary School PTA’s informal survey (2017) proposed that families were interested in making community-wide changes to school menus, whether their children were eating school served lunches or not. This desire to enrich the community’s lunch policies would seem to be driving local advocacy. The 2017 survey also exposed that many families avoid school supplied meals due to concerns about food quality and cost, citing processed and pre-packed ingredients that work against home values of health and sustainability.

While the community is investigating what is being served, Nutrition Services’ director, Sharon Gibson, is actively trying to engage families in the menu planning process to increase purchases (Gibson et al., 2018). Nutrition Services is currently operating under a strained budget. Gibson seeks improved program communication with district families, a deeper understanding of community objectives for district served meals, and a plan of action to address reduced school lunch program participation (Gibson et al., 2018). In March of 2018 Gibson solicited input from vocal members of the “Corvallis Families for Healthier School Meals” advocacy group bringing them together in the Corvallis school district office for a menu tasting and planning session. Attendees of this event became known as the Parent Menu Committee, collaborating via email and on site at the district central kitchen, sharing menu concepts and taste testing.
The Corvallis community’s focus on narrative presented a ripe opportunity to engage the Narrative Policy Framework, a policy process framework which provides means by which to study the influence of narratives on policy (M. D. Jones, McBeth, & Shanahan, 2014b). This paper is driven by the NPF theoretical framework which allows empirical examination of Corvallis stakeholder cultural food narratives. Further, my research leverages Cultural Theory (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990) to compare and make meaning of the various cultural worldviews, perspectives, ideas, and beliefs manifest in the Corvallis school district’s food policies.

What is clear from the school lunch conversation is that there is controversy. While the intricacy of the political, ideological, and cultural beliefs ensnarled in the policy stories may offer insight, we need a robust theoretical framework to make sense of the complexity. Thus, I now turn to the NPF and CT as tools.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper draws on policy process theory to simplify the complex elements that interact in the policy environment (P. A. Sabatier, 2007). The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) provides the tools to unearth stakeholder food stories from the data I collect and combined with Cultural Theory (CT) delivers an approach I can use to empirically examine how the contents of the stories vary.

Narrative Policy Framework (NPF)

The NPF defines storytelling as an integral (and powerful) part of policymaking, with participants—including individuals, groups, and institutions—both constructing and responding to narratives, affecting policy development, processes, and implementation (McBeth et al., 2014). The framework emerged from postmodern roots, but breaks sharply from those roots in its attempts to apply quantifiable and empirically measurable science to narratives and social construction (McBeth et al., 2014). The NPF model of the individual “Homo narrans” asserts that humans “prefer to think and speak in story form” (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2018, p. 179). Congruent with the structuralist narratology literature, the NPF divides policy stories into two components: structure (form) and content. In terms of structure, the NPF identifies generalizable elements including setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story, which researchers can observe across time, space, and differing policy contexts (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228). In terms of content, the NPF identifies two elements: belief systems and strategies, which are discussed more below. The NPF operates simultaneously at three levels of analysis, including the individual (micro-level), coalition and subsystem group (meso-level), and at the cultural and institutional (macro-level) (McBeth et al., 2014).
The NPF has a robust history of use and offers a wide body of literature documenting policy environments (M. D. Jones et al., 2014b). Much of this research has been quantitative (Pierce, Smith-Walter, & Peterson, 2014). However, more recent applications are increasingly embracing qualitative approaches (e.g., Gray & Jones, 2016).

**Narrative Structure**

**Four Core Policy Narrative Structural Elements: Setting, Character, Plot, and Moral**

As described above, the NPF identifies four key elements within policy narrative structure (McBeth et al., 2014). The first element is the *setting* which outlines the policy problem and context. NPF scholarship considers the *setting* to be the political, legal, economic, geographic, cultural and social environment in which the narrative is taking place. Contents of the setting also include “props,” such as scientific studies and other evidence (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228). The school lunch narrative setting is outlined in the previous section.

The second element is narrative *characters*. A policy narrative requires at least one, such as a hero, a villain, or a victim (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 229). NPF theory describes story characters as “victims who are harmed, villains who do the harm, and heroes who provide or promise to provide relief from the harm or a solution to the problem” (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228). The identification and description of these hero, villain and victim characters was foundational to my research design and formed the basis of my initial coding framework, which is discussed in more detail in subsequent sections.

The third policy narrative element is the *plot* which positions the characters across time and space within the story setting. Providing the “arc of action” within the narrative (McBeth et
al., 2014, p. 228), the plot engages characters to “generate and accumulate” emotions driving persuasion or motivating action (Crow & Jones, 2018).

The fourth NPF narrative element is the moral of the story. NPF scholarship describes story morals as providing “purpose” or a policy solution. The moral of the story defines the “call to action” for the audience (M. D. Jones, 2018). An example of a food policy moral is found in natural foods industry “go organic” campaigns which encourage consumers to buy organic and non-GMO foods, and which also attempt to establish authority in 3rd party consumer protection organizations like www.realorganicproject.org and www.nongmoproject.org. All of these elements, e.g. characters, plots, and morals were identified in my coding process and are discussed in more detail in subsequent sections.

While policy narrative structural elements are theorized to be generalizable, narrative content is considered to be more nuanced (M. D. Jones, 2018). The NPF assumes that people are boundedly rational, that stories are boundedly relative, and consequently people bracket their interpretations of story content in a manner that is neither boundless nor random (M. D. Jones, 2018). NPF scholarship applies strategies and belief systems as theoretical filters to attempt to provide boundaries to the meaning making that individuals inevitably engage in to make sense of story content (McBeth et al., 2014). I detail my approach to narrative content variation below.

**Narrative Content**

**Beliefs & Strategies**

Narrative content varies. In light of this difficulty, how does the social scientist address the assertion that truth is relative to experience and perspective (Baghramian & Carter, 2018)? The NPF acknowledges story content variation, referred to as narrative relativity: the idea that as individuals we interact with our environment and context constructing a unique narrative. To
moderate the problems arising from such interaction, in 2010 Jones and McBeth proposed using previously established belief systems measures such as Ideology (Lakoff, 2002) and Cultural Theory (Thompson et al., 1990), and strategies such as congruence, and issue expansion and containment as anchors to divine meaning made within diverse story contexts (M. D. Jones, 2010, p. 101; M. D. Jones & McBeth, 2010; McBeth et al., 2014).

The first way that NPF scholars approach content is to observe how individuals respond to narrative strategy. At the NPF micro level of analysis is the proposition that individuals will align along congruent values and belief systems. This congruence has been explored over a variety of NPF experiments and studies (M. D. Jones & Song, 2013; McBeth, Lybecker, & Stoutenborough, 2016; McMorris, Zanocco, & Jones, 2018), and suggests that people may be more willing to work together strategically to achieve coalition goals that are shaped by these congruent values. (See also the Discussion/Policy Prescription section for an exploration of how such strategy could play out in the Corvallis school food context.)

This paper focuses on the NPF’s belief systems approach to study narrative content. The scaffold of belief systems allows the researcher to make sense of how people make sense of narrative content, and attempt to understand why people assign specific meanings to various content within a narrative, such as a specific character, scientific evidence, or a symbol, such as the American or Rainbow flag. A variety of approaches, theories, and methods are available to policy scholars to evaluate variance among beliefs systems. Social science research proposes Cultural Theory as a promising tool (M. D. Jones, 2011; Scott & Carr, 2003; Seyfang, 2007b; Swedlow, Ripberger, Liu, Silva, & Jenkins-Smith, 2016; Marco Verweij, Luan, & Nowacki, 2011). Properly calibrated, belief system measurements will capture “systemic meaning-making in non-trivial segments of relevant populations” (M. D. Jones, 2018).
Building on its long history of use within the NPF (M. D. Jones, 2010, 2014; Jorgensen, Song, & Jones, 2017), and the interwoven relationship between food and culture, I propose that Cultural Theory will help explain respondents’ food policy stories in the way respondents understand food, and in relation to their social experiences and cultural backgrounds (see Food and Culture, A Reader by Counihan & Esterik, 2012, Mintz & Du Bois, 2002, and the early work of Cultural Theory originator Mary Douglas in Purity and Danger, 1966, 2002). In this study I made a conscious choice to combine the NPF with CT, using cultural categories to frame respondent beliefs, rather than political ideology or other methods of categorizing preferences. Ripberger and colleagues suggested that using ideology to proxy for categorizing values may be best suited for populations with high levels of political knowledge (Ripberger, Song, Nowlin, Jones, & Jenkins-Smith, 2012), from which we can infer that ideology is also useful when issues are partisan. In this case we are observing discussions about food and nutrition programs, long-standing bipartisan supported policies which would seem less tied to political ideological values, and more to deep cultural and historical beliefs around food.

**Cultural Theory (CT).**

CT, or the “grid-group” typology originated in the work of cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas, (see Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology, first published in 1970) and was further developed by Thomson, Ellis and Wildavsky (1990) and others. The CT typology evaluates social life along two dimensions, grid and group which describe the extent to which a person’s life is bound by group membership (group) and externally imposed rules (grid) (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 5).
The CT model is further illustrated by four quadrants which separate competing ideologies and cultural perspectives into four CT worldviews: fatalistic, hierarchical, individualistic, and egalitarian (see Figure 1 below).

![Figure 1 The Cultural Theory grid-group model]

These quadrants attempt to explain individual behavior and choice in varying social environments. Egalitarians, for example, exhibit strong group alliances and lean on communitarian values and preferences (Zanocco & Jones, 2018), whereas individualists reflect libertarian values and self-reliance (Seyfang, 2007a; Thompson et al., 1990). Fatalists, on the other hand maintain weak social bonds and are “resigned to a stratified society governed by rules” (McNeeley & Lazrus, 2014, p. 508), whereas hierarchist societies are tight knit, value tradition (Bunting, 2007), and are defined by clear rules, roles, and behavioral expectations (Douglas, n.d., p. 4).

Michael Thompson and collaborators overlaid the grid and group worldviews with four complimentary rationalities or "myths of nature" (Stoltz, 2014; Thompson et al., 1990). These myths (see figure 2 below) define the individualist’s worldview of nature as benign and resilient,
the egalitarian’s as ephemeral and fragile, the fatalist’s as capricious, and the hierarchist’s as perverse/tolerant (Schwarz & Thompson, 1990; Stoltz, 2014).

Figure 2: The Four Rationalities of the CT model

The Cultural Theory “impossibility theorem” suggests that the defined CT archetypes or ways of life are distinct, and that you can’t understand one without the other (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 3). These four rationalities or myths of nature are thus in constant competition, their very being dependent on the existence of the others (M. D. Jones, 2010, p. 96; M. Verweij & Thompson, 2006). For example, egalitarians may work cooperatively with a purpose of saving the fatalists from the whims of nature, but in doing so define themselves in opposition to the individualists and hierarchists. Such an effort can be spun as an act of heroism (e.g. a hero centric story), or simultaneously as an attempt to liberate victims (a villain centric story).

Cultural Theory used to categorize food policy narrative content

Grid-group theory originator Mary Douglas in her early anthropological scholarship (see Purity and Danger, 1969) suggested that humans like categories—when things are in their place, things are pure, and when things are out of place, purity is polluted (Callaghan, 2016; Douglas,
Categorization, therefore, brings order. Accordingly, this project employs CT as a method to categorize and bring order to narrative content, deductively identify variation amid research participants’ food story content, and further document participants within their respective CT categories. Combined with the NPF structural elements, CT archetypes and their associated myths of nature are thus operationalized to help explain motivations for individual behavior and choice in the food policy milieu, as manifest as specific policy plots and morals of the story.

As I outline in the following table, this paper suggests that how people respond to the narrative content aspects of food stories (such as menu features or specific characters) will be systemically associated with their CT worldviews. Further, certain narrative content may grab one’s attention over other content (Peterson, 2019), and an individual’s CT type may incline them to support one hero centric or villain centric plot over another. Which is to say, foods and food customs are ripe with cultural meaning that can be used to document what folks want in the content of their food policy narratives. Take for example the ubiquitous school cafeteria corndog. A childhood favorite, to some it may invoke a sense of aversion (to factory farmed meat encased in GMO-cornmeal), whereas to others it embodies only a familiar and tasty amusement park treat. One could conjecture that egalitarians are more likely to have negative responses to the corndog given their strong environmentalist tilt (Grendstad & Selle, 1997; M. D. Jones, 2011; Seyfang, 2007a) which also tends to positively correlate with hostility toward GMO’s and processed meats (Blancke, Van Breusegem, De Jaeger, Braeckman, & Van Montagu, 2015; Dreezens, Martijn, Tenbült, Kok, & de Vries, 2005). These cultural responses may then influence individuals to purchase or refrain from purchasing school lunch when a corndog is on the menu. An individual’s CT type may also guide them to rally for the removal of such an item from the menu or refrain from advocacy believing market forces will intervene when necessary.
Table 1 Cultural Theory archetypes, associated myths of nature, and descriptive keywords (see Stoltz, 2014; Thompson et al., 1990) overlaid with imaginable resultant NPF narrative structures and CT “guided” food policy narrative content. (See also the work of Seyfang, 2007; Blancke, Van Breusegem, De Jaeger, Braeckman, & Van Montagu, 2015; Dreezens, Martijn, Tenbült, Kok, & de Vries, 2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CT TYPE</th>
<th>Individualist</th>
<th>Egalitarian</th>
<th>Fatalist</th>
<th>Hierarchist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Myth of Nature Motivator</td>
<td>Individualist</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>Fatalist</td>
<td>Hierarchist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>benig and resilient</td>
<td>ephemeral and fragile</td>
<td>capricious and chaotic</td>
<td>perverse / tolerant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Libertarian values and self-reliance (Seyfang, 2007a;)</td>
<td>In group solidarity and mutualism</td>
<td>Apathy, isolation, helplessness</td>
<td>Stability, trust in rules, structure and regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institution as Hero:</td>
<td>Institution as Villain: Systemic villains</td>
<td>Withdrawal: Believing life is random and unpredictable, fatalists are left aloof and vulnerable to the whim of policy and policymakers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-serving savior to helpless victims.</td>
<td>necessitating social justice</td>
<td>Institution as Hero: Trust the experts, engage evidence-based changes to the status-quo.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot and Moral of the Story</td>
<td>The individualist values free choice and laissez faire competition. We can therefore expect an individualist to embrace change in policy if it were to increase a market, or to rally for the status quo if it makes more economic sense. The individualist consumer values a robust set of choices, but the individualist consumer can also choose to back a specific policy plan because of status or privilege yet remain unaffected by peer pressure that emphasizes community need (Seyfang, 2007a).</td>
<td>Egalitarian food policy stories may feature efforts for sustainability, social justice, and equity, with foods that are organic, non-GMO, and locally sourced (Seyfang, 2007a). The egalitarian will exhibit a commitment to community change, and a passion for advocacy, but facing disenchantment such individuals may collapse into fatalism (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 93).</td>
<td>The fatalist could be illustrated as an undocumented immigrant who offers no opinion on the program, fearing undue attention or observation. Sees little benefit in complaining or becoming politically involved, and so copes, and will not (or cannot) participate in advocacy or choice.</td>
<td>To avoid chaos, hierarchical communities operate by following guidelines, toting the line of the bureaucracy, which could be status quo. In our school lunch policy environment, the structured social safety net program (the NSLP) is driven by the national agency (the USDA), and its experts, academics, and scientists.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The strength of the grid-group influence, therefore, manifests differently dependent on social context, and is reflected in an individual’s worldview or cultural bias (Scott & Carr, 2003). Employed in this analysis, CT binds meaning-making in terms of the groups and prescriptions of one’s culture, thus allowing the researcher to systemically understand how individuals understand narrative content in the food policy environment, moderating the issue of narrative relativity described earlier (M. D. Jones, McBeth, & Shanahan, 2014a).

A discussion of CT is germane to understanding food policy narratives. Using cultural identity as explanatory is common in both academic work (Counihan & Esterik, 2012; Crowther, 2018; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002), and public opinion (Bourdain, n.d.; Choi, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2016). Food studies and cultural studies are particularly entwined, evidenced by the field of food anthropology and the growing body of interdisciplinary food and culture inquiry (Ashley, Hollows, Taylor, & Jones, 2004; Crowther, 2018). This paper was also inspired by research linking personal identity, communication, and food culture (Almerico, 2014; Stajcic, 2013). As Anthony Bourdain once described, “Food is everything we are. It’s an extension of nationalist feeling, ethnic feeling, your personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, your grandma. It’s inseparable from those from the get-go” (Bordain as cited by Smith, 2019). Indeed, cultural identity is well suited to this project as it feels nearly omnipresent throughout traditional food stories.

The body of CT literature contains a variety of applications to politics and policy (Thompson et al., 1990) and recently has been used to explore consumer values and preferences regarding organic food policy (Seyfang, 2007b). Likewise, NPF has been applied to the tangentially related area of obesity policy (Clemons, McBeth, & Kusko, 2012; McBeth, Clemons, Husmann, Kusko, & Gaarden, 2013), but to my knowledge there is no extant literature
which combines the two frameworks to look at childhood nutrition and food policy. Thus, this school lunch policy study is exploratory in nature and inductive by design, necessitating a qualitative lens.

**Qualitative NPF**

As described earlier, NPF scholarship is traditionally quantitative (Pierce et al., 2014), as the NPF is by design amenable to categorizing and breaking up stories into easily countable pieces. The NPF scholar assumes a structuralist interpretation with generalizable narrative elements applicable across varying policy contexts (McBeth et al., 2014). Quantitative NPF endeavors seek systematic pattern recognition; identifying patterns in the stories from which to define theory and attempt prediction (McBeth et al., 2014). The deductive quantifying features of the NPF method allow me to identify narrative structures, including setting, characters, plots, and morals.

Recent NPF scholarship has demonstrated compatibility with qualitative methods (Gray & Jones, 2016). In 2016 Gray and Jones operationalized the NPF using qualitative techniques to study elite narratives of campaign finance reform. That (2016) study offers a process roadmap to the qualitative researcher who must (1) clearly identify the policy issue, (2) carefully construct their research design and methods, (3) collect data and analyze it accordingly, and (4) properly present the structural narrative components in findings and discussion. The Gray & Jones (2016) qualitative NPF approach offers a gradient of interpretivism that while inductive, can also be combined with traditional deductive applications of the NPF (M. Jones, 2019).

The Corvallis school lunch environment is small, with a limited number of actors making a large survey study prohibitive. As yet, no one has conducted research about school lunch stories at the local level in Corvallis so we need the detailed minutia that a qualitative study can
provide. Interviews and induction embrace the human element, complementing the scientism present in the NPF. The depth of content provided by qualitative methods will also likely yield rich results with respect to individual’s beliefs, preferences, attitudes, and value systems.

Having established the gravity of narratives to the policy process and a theoretical framework to identify the distinct narrative structures and content at play in the Corvallis school food environment, we move on to research methodology.
THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE LUNCHBOX

METHODS

Research Design

Data Collection Process

Drawing on a series of qualitative interviews with elite decision makers and district families, and leveraging the district’s stated interest in collaborative problem solving (Gibson et al., 2018), this research project isolates competing cultural narratives through the lenses of the Narrative Policy Framework and Cultural Theory. To describe how these narratives vary along systemic dimensions and evaluate how that variation matters for policy outcomes, this paper asks the following questions: First, what are the school lunch stories of parent advocates and school lunch administrators in the Corvallis school district? Secondly, how do these stories vary, and along what dimension can we usefully conceive of the variation? Finally, how do local food stories and policies compare to national school lunch program goals and priorities?

In order to answer these questions, my research took an inductive approach from the start. I began as a participant in the field in 2017, joining a Corvallis advocacy group that was actively protesting existing food policies in the local elementary schools. In my observer role I witnessed the community’s narrative dialogue and a number of complaints about the school lunch menus. I observed Corvallis families engaging in contentious political activism, and the district responding with community engagement events. I kept notes and memoed about my observations in the field. My research design percolated during those initial meetings as I saw an opportunity for a larger research project. In time I realized that interviews would be necessary in order to get the depth of information needed to make solid findings so I approached the groups among which I was embedded to propose my research. I was received graciously—these
interviews provided a rich and nuanced understanding of Corvallis stakeholders’ perspectives about school food policy.

My interview findings raised interesting questions about the community’s social and policy preferences, and how these manifested in group participation. For example, why would folks noisily complain about the lunch program when they are not even regular consumers of school served meals? I watched stakeholders point fingers at government programs and share stories about the victims of poor food choices. I needed a means to understand how individuals make sense of food policy, as well as to allow me to access the subtext of meaning among the stories I heard in my interviews.

My participant observation, interviews, and the CT survey were supplemented by a literature review of national school lunch policy and an evaluation of the Corvallis school district’s formal menu offerings and policy communications. Beginning with my participant observation and continuing throughout the entire research project, I engaged in an iterative memoing process which allowed me to document my processes, explore themes, analyze data, and validate my findings. (See appendix A for a flowchart of my research activity.)

Preliminary research design began via memoing in the fall of 2017 in conjunction with participant observation. Formal project proposals, IRB, and approvals occurred in the fall of 2018. Most of my field research (e.g. interviews) took place in the winter and spring of 2019. Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively over this 2-year period, and a draft of my findings submitted in fall of 2019. (See appendix A for a timeline of research activity.) I detail each component of my research design below.
Memoing.

To document my research process, I used Maxwell’s (2013) strategies for memoing, recording my research experiences and exploring themes that emerged during the data collection process in handwritten notes and electronic documents. I memoed while observing in the field, before, during, and after interviews, and as a means to process and reflect on the information I found in the coding and data analysis process. These records evidence my interviewees’ tone and demeanor, and my own state of mind, adding color and texture to the language provided in the interview transcriptions. For example, several interviews were held in homes wherein I witnessed a conspicuous chaos. In my memos I described this extraordinary clutter—which seems par for the course in child raising—as a reflection of the areas of life the individuals choose to bring order to (or not). I then reflected on the chaotic policy environment in which parents and families are making choices about nutrition for their kids, and again, considered which areas they choose to prescribe order to (or not).

These memoing journals were foundational to my research method, informing my data interpretation and analysis, and were consulted throughout the entire process of research (Patton, 2014; Peshkin, 2000; Saldaña, 2009). Through these reflective memos I developed self-awareness (Peshkin, 2000), acknowledging my own lack of objectivity. This memoing was intended to enhance the quality of my interpretations, situate my findings in the context of a theoretical framework (Peshkin, 2000), and help substantiate credibility.

Participant Observation & Interviews.

I began memoing as a participant observer attempting to investigate the conflicting narratives I observed among Corvallis school lunch program advocates. My research design was informed by my initial experience as a participant observer over the course of the 2017-2018
school year, wherein local families engaged with the Corvallis district’s Nutrition Services and successfully lobbied for changes to the lunch menus. I was also part of the 2017-2018 Corvallis School District Parent Menu Committee, an ad hoc group of community members that formed spontaneously to collaborate with Corvallis Nutrition Services. At this time I was engaging with the body of NPF literature in my Oregon State University (OSU) coursework, a lens which allowed me to imagine the school lunch environment as a collection of villains, victims and heroes, each pushing their own distinct policy plot and moral of the story. I reflected on these observations in written memos, through which my research project began to take form.

Participant observation at the district’s school board meetings and family engagement events also permitted me to document community voices about school nutrition in the wider context of the district’s commitments to childhood wellness (“Corvallis School District Health and Wellness,” n.d.; “Policies and Guiding Principles,” n.d.).

Via memos I explored my research idea through the lens of several OSU courses, e.g. Public Administration, Public Policy Analysis and Systems of Oppression in Women’s Lives. A school lunch policy literature review provided little to go on in terms of local Corvallis voices, and the nuance at play in the policy narratives I did observe made it difficult to synthesize a coherent thesis. It thus became clear that interviews would be needed in order to access a deeper understanding of stakeholder opinions, values, and perspectives about school lunches.

I envisioned the opportunity to engage a qualitative application of the NPF and presented my initial research proposal to the Parent Menu Committee in person at the District School Lunch Planning Session on March 8, 2018. This event was attended by a group of approximately twenty families from across the six schools in the Corvallis district. Following IRB approval in January of 2019, with help from the Corvallis Schools Foundation Parent
Leadership team, I solicited formal interviews from the Parent Menu Committee via email. This outreach generated seven of my eleven interviews. This first group of seven included the family and PTA leadership which spearheaded the initial 2017 Forum on School Food, along with the head of Corvallis’ Nutrition Services. I chose to include Nutrition Services in my protocol as their office had been instrumental in bringing together district families to talk about school lunch policy and brainstorm collaborative solutions.

Memoing was used to document all of my outreach, develop a snowball sampling contact list beyond the Parent Menu Committee, and design a flyer for distribution at the elementary schools to recruit additional families and caregivers for offsite interviews. An email box was developed for preliminary interview recruitment and to allow community members to correspond with me directly (corvallisschoollunchstudy@gmail.com). Recruitment of interview participants also occurred in person, and/or telephone using publicly available contact information. The snowball sampling and flyer generated four additional interviews.

Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of a series of 13 questions (see Appendix B) about the Corvallis school lunch environment, individuals’ preferences and values pertaining to school-age nutrition, and other aspects of school food policy. Participants were permitted to interrupt the researcher to ask or skip questions when either clarification was needed or the interviewee did not feel inclined to address the question. Interviews ran between thirty to sixty minutes, with the average lasting just under an hour. Interviews were conducted in person in the participant’s office or other location of the participant’s choice. The eleven interviews were recorded digitally. The ConnecticutSecretary.com service was used to transcribe interviews and conversations. These transcriptions were edited and coded manually and the data analyzed, a process which is discussed in more detail in subsequent sections.
Cultural Theory Survey.

A CT survey (M. D. Jones, 2011) was administered at the end of each interview to help provide understanding to how people were potentially making sense of the narrative content (e.g. policy characters, plots, and morals) within food policy narratives I encountered both during participant observation and the interviews (See Appendix C for the survey instrument and Appendix D to review the CT survey questions and categories.). Subjects were asked to complete this brief printed survey containing a series of twelve randomly ordered statements, with three of the twelve statements pertaining to each of the four CT types (M. D. Jones, 2011). For each response, participants were asked to place themselves on a scale from one to three, where one is disagree, two is neutral, and three is agree. Respondents then received summative scores for each of the four cultural types, which allowed respondents to be categorized as either fatalistic, hierarchical, individualistic, or egalitarian (M. D. Jones, 2011). Respondents’ resulting CT worldviews were then compared to information identified during observations and revealed through interviews. (See the findings section below, as well as Appendix C and D for supplemental details on the CT survey.) By asking about CT types after the program and policy related questions, I hoped to avoid introducing potential biases from the survey instrument into stakeholder interview responses.

Data Analysis Process

A Purposive Representative Sample.

The Parent Menu Committee members were vocal. They were also willing to speak publicly about their perspectives, and their food policy stories addressed the study’s outlined objectives and research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 148–149; Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). Of the approximately twenty families who attended the District School Lunch Planning Session
in March of 2018, seven agreed to participate in my interviews. Assuming that the loudest voices are the most powerful and likely to achieve their goals, my interview selection was purposeful in that it identified decision makers (for production and consumption)—those individuals who are likely to hold the power to facilitate change in the school lunch program. As described above, the groups I observed and the individuals I met with are some of the most strident voices (regarding nutrition policy) in the Corvallis School District wherein I live and my child attends school. These include the director of the district’s Nutrition Services, as well as parents and caregivers of children who purchase and or consume school provided meals on school campuses. The ability to get individuals to participate in the interview process likely benefited from my existing relationships and long-standing rapport with Corvallis families.

As instructed by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Patton (2014), I sought a representative and heterogenous group of respondents. I observed parents, caregivers, PTA/PTO leaders, and the district’s Nutrition Services staff from across the seven elementary schools in the 509J district. I interviewed eleven respondents to identify common themes (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017), supplemented by informal discussions with more than fifteen others during my participant observation, (e.g. chats at menu planning meetings, PTA events, and other parent leadership meetings,) drawing representatives from each of the stakeholder groups listed above. Interviews were continued until saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 87, 318; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017), an occasion I reflected upon in my memos. Saturation is described as the point in data collection wherein we no longer find new information to add to our understanding of the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This paper leans on Hagaman & Wutich (2017) findings which suggest that in relatively homogenous groups, sixteen or fewer interviews is sufficient to identify common themes and reach data saturation in qualitative research.
The following table reports specifics on stakeholder type, including how many children their family currently has in the elementary schools in Corvallis, along with grade level, and an approximation of their school lunch participation. Each of these interview respondents answered questions about narrative characters, plots, and morals, findings which are presented in subsequent sections of this paper.

Table 2 Corvallis School Lunch Study Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Number of children in Corvallis schools</th>
<th>Grade of student(s)</th>
<th>Total number of school lunches purchased per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2nd and 4th</td>
<td>1,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>A couple of times a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delia</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>1x per week, 2-3x per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kindergarten and 2nd</td>
<td>2x per month, favorites only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>None at the elementary, but 1 at high school, 1 at middle school</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Nearly every day at the high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Rotates 1x per week or every day, depending one student (0-1x per week)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2nd and 3rd</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issac</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1x per month up from 2x per year prior to menu updates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My interview sample consisted of eleven elite stakeholders, including parents, caregivers, and PTA/PTO leaders from across the seven elementary schools in the 509J district, along with
the director of the district’s Nutrition Services. These individuals reported varying degrees of participation in the school lunch program (measured by weekly lunch purchase) as well as varying degrees of advocacy work to solicit change in the Corvallis school lunch menus. The eleven individuals I spoke with reported purchasing a total of nine meals per week on behalf of twelve students.

**Validity.**

This paper follows the Gray and Jones (2016) qualitative approach to establish validity. I employ Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry* criteria for research trustworthiness. This four-point benchmark (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) includes *credibility* (which I establish via triangulation), *transferability* (established via purposive sampling), *dependability* (via consistent research processes), and *confirmability* (through replicability of findings).

In my research I employ triangulation to corroborate evidence from a variety of data sources which helps avoid threats to validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260). These sources include findings from my field research, (participant observation, the series of interviews, and survey), and literature review (my analysis of the school lunch menus and policy documents). Further strategies for validation include the use of “thick rich descriptions” fed from my longstanding relationships with my research subjects, along with “prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260).

As a district parent, my connections within the “Corvallis Families for Healthier School Meals” advocacy group represented a reliable base for participation for interviews and survey. As a member of the *Parent Menu Committee* and an active PTA member and leader, I am an insider; I have gained rapport with the advocacy effort’s leaders, school administrators, as well as parents in the district. As Fontana and Frey describe, my close rapport with the respondents opens the
door for nuanced, rich descriptions, yet it may potentially create problems with respect to loss of distance and objectivity (Fontana & Frey, 2005). To head off these potential complications, I engaged in an iterative reflection process in memos and a variety of validation measures.

Bernard describes that many participant observations studies “are done in a matter of weeks or a few months” (Bernard, 2006). Having attended the school district’s initial meetings about school lunches in 2017, I had over a year of collaboration and observation. I am able to complement my interviews and research with a coherent backstory attained through shared experience.

Throughout the course of this research project I attended multiple events featuring parent and public comment and will continue to attend these ongoing events.

To establish critical subjectivity and further substantiate my findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018), in my research I actively clarify my own bias and seek both peer review and participant feedback. I documented these perspectives through reflective memos and journaling and incorporated them into my analysis. (See Appendix G for a formal positionality statement and to get a deeper understanding of my bias.) As Maxwell (2013) describes, making these transparent helps minimize their effect on validity.

**Coding.**

As described previously, at the heart of my research design is my memoing process. I memoed about my observations, reflections, interview content, and the research process in general. These memos, along with policy documents and interview transcriptions were then analyzed for keywords and themes using the coding process I describe below. Contextual data, including school lunch menus and policy documents were also gathered and analyzed similarly.

My research project was theory-led, in that it uses theory as a means to access the answers to my research questions. Thus, I engaged the theoretical scaffolds of NPF and CT to
facilitate my code development, data analysis, data representation, and to extrapolate meaning from what I found. In general, I followed the Creswell and Poth (2018) five-point methodology for data analysis and representation for a case study. This methodology instructs the researcher to (1) capture and organize data, (2) review the text, making notes in the margins and forming initial codes, (3) illustrate the case and context, (4) aggregate categories to establish themes and patterns, and finally (5) directly interpret and help develop “naturalistic generalizations” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 199–206). Such naturalistic generalizations allow individuals to learn from the case itself, or apply learning to other similar populations (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 206). This process thus contributes to my research validity as well through its transferability.

For purposes of analyzing the interviews and other content, I developed a preliminary set of codes using theoretical elements from the NPF and CT, which were modified during the process of data analysis to capture emergent ideas and concepts not captured in my initial codebook (Maxwell, 2013). These codes were also reflected in my interview questions. The following narrative form elements were coded: Characters (Hero/Villain/Victim), Rationale/Plot, and Moral/Policy Solution. In terms of narrative content, beliefs were operationalized using CT, which was used to understand how people make sense of their food policy plots and identified morals, and document research participants within their identified CT type. (See theory discussion above, including table 1 and figure 2). CT worldviews layered four additional codes over the narrative structure and content data, including fatalistic, hierarchical, individualistic, and egalitarian.

While my Apple Macbook Pro computer and Microsoft software helped facilitate the task of organizing my data (e.g. in memos, summaries of field notes, transcriptions, and tables of data), much of my analytical strategy of reducing codes to themes, and relating themes to
categories largely took place in my head (see Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 181 who cite Patton as suggesting that the “real analytical work takes place in your head.”) In addition to this manual coding I conducted a loose content analysis using word cloud software to help identify keywords from interviews that matched up with my codebook. This pattern coding was used to identify common themes in the data (Saldaña, 2009), drafted by hand in memos, and in Microsoft Exel. I followed a multiphase coding process (Saldaña, 2009) to highlight emergent themes, induce discussion among the categories, and permit synthesis of my conclusions (Maxwell, 2013).

When presenting participant voices in my memos and codebook I did not disclose children’s identities. To protect the anonymity of interviewees and de-identify data, a set of pseudonyms was generated and used to present my findings.

Utilizing the 2016 Gray and Jones approach to transparent and credible documentation, my coding was used inductively, carefully connecting stakeholder stories pertaining to the school nutrition environment to CT, reflecting NPF character, plot, and moral archetypes, and identifying relationships to policy perception, support and opposition. I approached this process as a grounded theorist, open coding my interview transcriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018) by clustering the information I had into the categories listed above (e.g. NPF narrative elements, CT worldviews, and associated policy participation,) and then looking for themes which stood out to guide my analysis. Memoing was also used to reflect on the coding process.

The goal of this research project is to document the controversy and conflicting narratives at play in the Corvallis school food environment. In the following section I present the findings of my quest with accompanying illustrations.
FINDINGS

My qualitative NPF project evaluated variation across school lunch policy narratives among eleven elite stakeholders in the Corvallis School District. I explored narrative elements including characters (e.g. villains, victims, and heroes), plots, and story morals. The CT survey identified an egalitarian majority in my sample, yielding ten egalitarians and one individualist. The eleven people I spoke with reported purchasing a total of nine meals per week on behalf of twelve students. Structured by this study’s research questions, I present findings below, followed by a subsequent section providing discussion of the policy implications and potential prescriptions of the findings.

Research Q1: What are the school lunch stories of parent advocates and school lunch administrators in the Corvallis school district?

To answer my first research question, I overlaid the NPF with CT to code and identify my interview transcriptions and memos. I did this using the CT worldviews and myths of nature described in previous sections as a framework to understand how people make sense of food policy content (e.g. characters, plots and identified morals), as well as to understand how my interviewees ground themselves within the belief systems manifest within specific policy narrative content. (See the theory discussion above, and research Q2 below for more on the CT divide.)

The Cast of Characters: Villains, Victims, and Heroes

At the micro-level, NPF theory finds that narrative characters (e.g. villains, victims, and heroes) are powerful variables, imbued with capacity to harness emotion and shape preferences (McBeth et al., 2014, pp. 235–236). For example, in food policy narratives a villain is someone stakeholders believe is actively causing harm to a victim, motivating a hero to intervene. An
example of such a food policy narrative is illustrated by parent uproar over the 2012 efforts by
government and school districts to purchase ammonia treated beef (aka “pink slime”) from Beef
Products Inc. (BPI) for use by the National School Lunch Program (Flock, 2012).

The policy narrative characters I identified in my interviews and participant observation
are presented below. I report the findings in summary as well as offering a table matrix with
direct quotes from interview transcriptions. Some interviewee’s story characters received more
than one type of character code (e.g. as both a villain and a hero), just as some policy morals also
had overlapping beneficiaries (e.g. egalitarians and individualists both cite the same story
victims). The matrices serve as an exercise of Creswell and Poth’s qualitative narrative inquiry
approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 71), attempting to allow my research subjects’ own voices
to present the complex nature of the food policy environment in Corvallis. (For a detailed
discussion about competing narratives see also CT findings under Research Q2 below.)

The Villains

As illustrated in the table below, interview respondents described a variety of villains and
villainous behaviors in the context of school nutrition. Interviewees referenced uncaring
capitalists and industrial farmers, the government bureaucrats and Congress who generate the
school lunch policies, as well as school district officials that some see as instrumental in
approving less sustainable (or perhaps unhealthy) choices for school meals. Others pointed to
inherent faults in “the system” of U.S. economics as the true villain in food policy.

Heroes to one stakeholder could also be described as villains by another. For example,
rallying for a policy change which removes a contentious menu item was perceived as foul-play
by others who value free choice. This scenario is best illustrated by the individualist who values
free choice options for the lunch line, while rebuffing limits, alongside the egalitarians’ preferred
choices which impose limits, (e.g. around food type: less salt, less sugar, fewer processed foods, more fresh fruit and vegetables).

**Table 3 Villains Identified in Food Policy Narratives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Villains (“The Bad Guys”)</th>
<th>Direct quotes from interview transcriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Maybe the bad guys are people who don’t want to pay taxes for schools. Because [they] don’t value education...I feel like there are a lot of people out there who think “well I got my education. And screw everybody else.” Not that they’re not involved in the system directly. Even though the system very much effects them in terms of building productive citizens.” (Erin, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I have a feeling there's some bad guys up there in terms of funneling processed food to school lunch programs and making it so easy and cheap to do it that way that often other ways are overlooked. It's just easier to go with...the convenience...I assume there's lobbying about companies wanting their products to become part of the school lunch program.” (Frida, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“…not bad guys, but I think there's just choices being made and sometimes there's business interests involved. I think it's more of a group, and it's just generally different levels of different groups of people making decisions. And sometimes they may not be able aware of this is what the school, wants, or a community, or families want. And I think part of it is figuring out what do people really want? What do they value here?” (Bonnie, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncaring capitalists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government bureaucrats</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “system” (economics)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition Services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District food decision makers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Victims**

Across the board respondents described the true victims of school food policy as the children. This was the case regardless of which CT worldview, and whether interviewees were district staff, administrators, or families. Generally, interviewees described the most vulnerable victim characters as the children who depend on the school provided lunch service subsidy. One interviewee suggested that the victim of poor food policy is society as a whole, as children who
are not given robust food and lifestyle education while young people grow up to make poor choices in adulthood.

While the subjects I interviewed made it very clear that NSLP qualified families and children are the most vulnerable and therefore most deserving of program changes, several also disclosed that their own families have the luxury of choice to opt in or out of the policy. Not one of my interview participants admitted to purchasing school lunch more than twice a week for their children, and none indicated that they see themselves or their own children as potential victims. I present the victim characters which emerged through my coding process in the table below.

Table 4 Victims Identified in Food Policy Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VICTIMS IDENTIFIED IN FOOD POLICY NARRATIVES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Victims ("The Losers")**

- Children
- Families and children dependent on social services
- Food consumers overall

**Direct quotes from interview transcriptions**

*Wow, that's a tough one. I don't know if anybody loses. I think there's just misunderstandings. And I think, I adore teachers and I think they work really, really hard, but if they don't support our program the kids are gonna follow what teachers do, too, so I think it's all do what I do...And then do something really good, and support. Support our programs because if we weren't in there, that would not be a good thing if you didn't have a program."* (Cathy, 2019)

*“I feel like the people who probably lose the most are the ones who are right on the edge of the free or reduced lunch cut off...Because they're paying full price. While they can barely afford it.”* (Erin, 2019)

*“I guess the fact that there are families that can't afford to eat lunch if the program went away altogether. They would be in trouble. Even if it is less than great quality, it would presumably be better than nothing.”* (Frida, 2019)

*“I would think it was an unhealthy school lunch menu, then the children on Free and Reduced lunch suffer. The people who are receiving free or reduced lunch and don't have that choice to just bring some food from home if they want to.”* (Bonnie, 2019)
The Heroes

The predominant hero characters interviewees identified were those in the district (staff and volunteers) who are committed to school nutrition as a means of improving the health of all kids. The heroes mentioned by respondents included parents and food advocates who are working to promote equitable access to healthy, sufficient, and culturally relevant choices, and to increase the consumer base of lunch program beyond NSLP free and reduced, along with grants and community collaboration. Some respondents specifically mentioned the power of the food service staff to make positive changes, contrasted to villains in Congress or government bureaus whose economic policies and budget cuts are damaging to social programs. One respondent suggested that they really don’t like the word heroes as it’s too extreme, that the ones making a difference are “just advocating and they've made that a priority in their life.” I present the hero characters which emerged through my coding process in the table below.

Table 5 Heroes Identified in Food Policy Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEROES IDENTIFIED IN FOOD POLICY NARRATIVES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heroes (“The Good Guys”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social Justice advocates (parents, kids, and staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lunch Lady</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Advocates for school wellness programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Michelle Obama (Let’s Move program)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Advocates for sustainable practices, food rescue, waste avoidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct quotes from interview transcriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I guess the good guys, in my mind, would be...the people who are striving to make these palatable and attractive to students.” (Kim, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Parents that are advocating for healthier food for their kids would be on the good side. But I feel like [Nutrition Services] are trying hard to be responsive to the parents and that's another good thing. (Frida, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I feel like our district is the good guys. I feel like they work hard. That they’re doing the best they can. And they are constantly trying to change. They’re getting input from people. Like I don’t envy their jobs. I think it’s tough to feed a whole lot of kids with not a ton of resources.” (Holly, 2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“…It’s anybody in food service...you can’t be involved in school food “unless you care.” (Cathy, 2019)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Narrative Plots and Morals

NPF scholarship defines the *plot* as the “arc of action” within the narrative (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228), whereas the story’s morals provide “purpose” to the characters which frequently is a policy solution or call to action. In this section of my findings I identify the policy plots and morals for which stakeholders strive. The two primary plots I identified in my interviews and participant observation were either hero centric or villain centric. The hero centered plot showcases the institution as hero and focuses on waste avoidance to fulfill the USDA mission, whereas the villain centered plot features systemic villains at odds with community heroes and school-aged victims. A table outlining these plots and morals is followed by a discussion of my findings.

*Table 6 Plots and Morals Identified in Food Policy Stories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLOTS</th>
<th>MORAL OF THE STORY/ POLICY IMPLICATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hero Centric Plot</strong></td>
<td>• <em>Status quo policy</em>&lt;br&gt;• <em>Market solutions</em>&lt;br&gt;• <em>Environmental &amp; sustainability efforts</em>&lt;br&gt;• <em>Reduce harm to child victims</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution as Hero:</td>
<td><em>Promoting waste avoidance to fulfill USDA mission</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Villain Centric Plot</strong></td>
<td>• <em>Revolutionary policy change</em>&lt;br&gt;• <em>Blame game</em>&lt;br&gt;• <em>Focus on food quality</em>&lt;br&gt;• <em>Reduce harm to child victims</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution as Villain:</td>
<td><em>Pushing back against systemic villains in “Big Agriculture” who are stacking choice with low-quality foods</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Hero Centric Plot**

*Institution as Hero: Promoting waste avoidance to fulfill USDA mission.*

The hero-centric narrative featured institutional protagonists, either community members or those who implement policy, with sustainability and waste avoidance as a common theme. School lunch programs fall under the USDA whose agency mission is to “Feed Everyone” (USDA, 2017). The USDA is headed by Agriculture Secretary Sonny Purdue, who recently suggested “it doesn’t do any good to serve nutritious meals if they wind up in the trash can” (Brueck, 2018). The USDA suggests saving food from the waste bin is an important method of cost savings for the school lunch program while redirecting the food discarded by some into the mouths of willing consumers. Leveraging waste avoidance, this plot and moral embraces economic philosophies to reduce food waste in school cafeterias and classrooms and fulfill the USDA mission.

My research indicates that the waste avoidance narrative has been embraced warmly by Corvallis’ community, although the plot and moral of the story reflect the locals’ environmentally conscious cultural orientation. Currently Corvallis schools maintain an active sustainability coalition, with partnerships between the Corvallis Environmental Center, Oregon Green Schools, and school based “green teams” to reduce power consumption, encourage recycling, and avoid food waste. Interviewees spoke at length about the sustainability efforts, grateful to school staff and parent volunteers who assist onsite, gathering food scraps and compostable materials for composting in school gardens and processing by the local waste management services. Also available at the schools are “sharing tables” and “sharing bins”, communal spaces where students can place wrapped and other uneaten items such as whole fruit and unopened milk cartons for sharing.
Interviewees cited varying degrees to which they support the local lunch program by purchasing it, although their rationale appeared to be homogenous: food quality, cost, and convenience topped their lists. Sustainability issues and recycling were also cited as key rally points for stakeholders, some of whom were active in the school-based green teams.

The *institution as hero* plot I describe here was coded as a heroic effort by government advanced solutions to save child victims, although to that end the nature of the plot motivation and moral of the story was coded as self-serving and entrepreneurial (e.g. reduce waste in the supply chain which will thus increase the economic bottom line.) This said, moral of the story findings which feature sustainability efforts crosses over with egalitarian codes, as exemplar of the egalitarian CT archetype which cherishes sustainability, with equality and equity for membership (Seyfang, 2007a; Thompson et al., 1990). Findings are also in line with the Ripburger et al (2012) assertion that “we know that people with egalitarian values tend to support environmentally friendly policies.” (*For a detailed discussion about individualist and egalitarian worldviews see CT findings under Research Q2 below.*)

**Villain Centric Plot**

*Institution as Villain: Pushing back against systemic villains in “Big Agriculture” who are stacking choice with low-quality foods.*

A villain-centric plot also came up in interviews. This plot relies on concerns about elite policymakers in Congress and government agencies who interviewees feel put greater weight on market driven policies than on childhood nutrition. Common critiques mentioned by interviewees included systemic/mechanical complaints (e.g. an unjust system which perpetuates poverty and stigma,) “big agriculture” villains, and a lack of awareness around sustainability.
Interestingly, my interview data is in contrast to the national conversation around school lunch food quality which is frequently couched in a childhood obesity frame, calling out students as well as parents and schools for perpetuating individuals’ poor choices by offering excessive processed snacks and pre-packed convenience foods. Throughout my observation in the field I heard multiple concerns about poor nutrition, although no one I spoke with raised specific concerns about childhood obesity. One interviewee did express some concern about how much food kids are offered in schools, particularly the number of eating opportunities. This subject stressed quality over quantity but a need for more physical activity as important for healthy growth and development. Overall, interviewees described very clear and specific ideals for what is a healthy meal choice and what is not. As expected, the individualist respondent emphasized freedom of choice, focusing their comments on children’s excessive access to candy and sugary snacks.

The institution as villain plot was coded as an egalitarian narrative, with story morals highlighting the need for equitable access to hygiene, food quantity, and food quality, including organic, fresh, whole grains, and culturally relevant options. Interviewees described community and institutions championing on behalf of child victims, principally children whose families rely on social services, or children susceptible to falling prey to villainous uncaring capitalists.

As we dig into the substance of egalitarian priorities in the school lunch environment the story gets more interesting. Thompson et al. assert that egalitarians hold the “system” to blame when things go awry, a system consisting of some combination of hierarchy and individualists (Thompson et al., 1990, pp. 59–60). Seyfeng (2007) too emphasizes the egalitarian’s mission around justice and equity, as well as organic food promotion. Allegedly, the egalitarians see it as their personal duty to “unmask authority and reveal the connection between benign institutions
and the harm they actually cause” (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 60). My research findings identified this scenario on the ground in Corvallis, illustrated by a distinctly adversarial crusade to overhaul school menus, beginning in 2017. Of great concern to many families during the 2017-2018 school year was the “walking taco.” This contentious dish was a package of Doritos chips with cooked ground taco meat or beans tucked inside. Just as Thompson and his colleagues might have calculated (see Cultural Theory, 1990 pp. 62-63.), the “walking taco” campaign stationed egalitarians in their element, warning of risk, seeking to cleanse the system, and attempting to rid the district of the “imminent catastrophe” presented by the “walking taco.” This dish became exhibit A in a protracted battle of concerned parents versus the district nutrition vendor (Garfield Elementary School PTA, 2017). Following a series of menu planning meetings bringing together district Nutrition Services and concerned families, this dish was removed from the lunch menu and replaced by a variety of items, including a hummus and pita plate, and a Thai vegetable pizza.

This paper proposes that how interviewees make meaning from their experiences and describe their efforts and action is directly tied with their cultural beliefs around food. As introduced earlier, I invoke CT as a proxy for stakeholders’ value systems, a systemic means by which to distill meaning from narrative content variation amidst food policy stories, and to help me document stakeholders amidst their variable policy plots and morals. I shift now to an analysis of that variance.

**Research Q2: How do these stories vary, and along what dimension can we usefully conceive of the variation?**

I operationalized CT to help connect the dots between NPF character variation, plot motivation, and resulting morals of the story. Specifically, as described in previous sections of
this paper, overlaying CT with the NPF helps establish a link between the prevailing CT worldviews and cultural myths of nature, and the resulting narrative plots and morals enacted by stakeholders. I began by categorizing narrative content (research Q1), and I move on now to document my research subjects within their CT type. In this section I present my findings which identified an egalitarian majority in my sample (ten of my eleven interviewees). I follow my demonstration of the CT variation with a table and presentation of egalitarian motivations from which their predominant institution as villain plot would seem to stem. I also address the overlap of support for the institution as hero waste avoidance plot across the egalitarian and individualist worldviews.

Cultural Theory Lens to Assess Narrative Content Variation

Following the 30-60 minute interview, subjects completed a Cultural Theory survey based on the Jones (2011) protocol. Subjects were asked to complete this brief printed survey containing a series of twelve randomly ordered statements, with three of the twelve statements pertaining to each of the four CT types (M. D. Jones, 2011) (See Appendix C to review the survey instrument.) For each response, participants were asked to place themselves on a scale from one to three, where one is disagree, two is neutral, and three is agree. The survey was administered to participants after the interview was complete and was intended to allow participants to self-identify their predominant CT narrative (e.g. fatalist, individualist, heirarchist, or egalitarian.) Each measure of the CT narrative type is a summation of three questions corresponding to each CT type, thus ranging from 3 – 9 (M. D. Jones, 2011).

As shown in the following graph, the majority of interviewees “agreed” with statements E1, E2, and E3 on the survey (note the green coded bars), indicating an egalitarian leaning among the sample.
The CT survey identified an egalitarian majority in my sample, yielding ten egalitarians and one individualist. The following graph summarizes these findings by illustrating the
frequency with which “agree” was chosen by the eleven participants on the survey’s egalitarian statements, compared to the individualist, hierarchist, and fatalist statements. The measures of the CT narrative types in this graph are broken out for a total score of thirty-three, accounting for the frequency by which the eleven survey participants chose “disagree,” “neutral”, or “agree” over each category which contains three questions.

Subsequently, each subject’s score was totaled and compared, with the top scoring CT category identifying the subject’s dominant CT type. In my research pool of eleven interviewees, I identified ten egalitarians and one individualist. I did not identify any fatalists or hierarchists in my findings. The following graph presents each participant’s total score in each of the four cultural type measures.
Variation Amid Cultural Theory Worldviews

One way to approach CT survey research is to operate under an assumption that one’s position within the CT quadrants is mutually exclusive (M. D. Jones, 2010, 2011). This method categorizes survey respondents into just one CT type over the three others, while still acknowledging the CT “impossibility theorem,” that one can’t understand one CT quadrant without reference to the others (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 3). Here, however, I have attempted to flex these boundaries in order to provide transparency and authenticity. Instead of highlighting just the dominant CT type identified for each interviewee, I also measure the distance between participants’ dominant CT type score, and their scores for the secondary, tertiary and quaternary CT types identified by the CT survey. The sum of these distance measurements is used as a means to establish the strength by which individuals are embedded within their own CT way of life. This measurement also serves to help identify variation amid my egalitarian findings.

To weigh the strength of an interviewee’s CT type, I measured the difference between the subject’s dominant CT type score and each of their other CT type scores. As an example, one of
the strongest CT worldview measurements among my respondents scored 9 in the egalitarian
category, 4 for fatalist, 3 for hierarchy, and 3 for individualist. Thus, this respondent is measured
as a 17-point egalitarian. In my analysis I consider weighted scores of over 11 as strong (M. D.
Jones, 2010). A weighted score of 11 was also found to be the median score of the egalitarians I
surveyed.

The weighted measurements determine the strength of one’s dominant CT type relative to
the other three CT types. This process was intended to report how embedded the individual
identifies themselves in their dominant CT measure, and how weak they may be in other CT
types. The table below outlines the results of the weighted CT findings.

Table 7 Interviewee CT Weighted Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Primary CT Type</th>
<th>Weighted CT Score</th>
<th>Weighted CT Strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delia</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Individualist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issac</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted, the survey protocol identified both weak and strong egalitarians, ranging from
a weighted score of 4 on the weak end to 18 points on the top end. The lone individualist
measured a weighted score of 5. I used these weak and strong clusters to group my participants
for analysis purposes. The following graph illustrates the weighted CT scores for all interview
participants.
Having classified respondents into weak and strong clusters, I looked at associated factors that were common among them. It is interesting to note that among the strongest egalitarians (Erin, Frida, Issac, and Jasmine,) not one has individualist as their next highest measure. Further, the lone individualist would seem rather “non-committal,” with little distinct variation in their CT measures—scoring 6 in the individualist category, 5 in the egalitarian and hierarchist category, and three in fatalist.

I further compared the results of the survey to data obtained through my interviews and participant observation, triangulating individuals’ stated interest and involvement in parental advocacy about school nutrition. In interviews I asked individuals if they participated in the Parent Menu Committee and/or the “Corvallis Families for Healthier School Meals” advocacy group. I reported these answers as a “yes or no” to a “Direct participant in local school lunch policy advocacy” role (see the table below) which then allowed me to compare interviewees dominant CT type with their proclivity to participate in advocacy. Members of the Parent Menu Committee and/or the “Corvallis Families for Healthier School Meals” advocacy group were found to be strong egalitarians with a weighted CT type score of over 11. Additional parents and

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**Figure 6: Strength of Cultural Theory Worldviews**

![Strength of Cultural Theory Worldviews](image)

---
caregivers who had not been involved in advocacy fell squarely in the egalitarian category with weighted strength scores between 4 and 6. The lone weak individualist did not report engaging in advocacy.

Table 8 Interviewee CT Weighted Scores with Lunch Policy Advocacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Primary CT Type</th>
<th>Weighted CT Score</th>
<th>Weighted CT Strength</th>
<th>Direct participation in local school lunch policy advocacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delia</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Individualist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issac</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>No (Despite not being involved in the school lunch-centric advocacy, this person was very vocal in encouraging others, and participated in other areas of child-focused advocacy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>No (Despite not being involved in the school lunch-centric advocacy, this person was very vocal in encouraging others, and participated in other areas of child-focused advocacy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strong Egalitarians Engage in Advocacy

As shown in the charts and graphs above, nearly across the board my participants identified as egalitarian, with variation primarily in how strongly they hold their cultural mission, and how firmly they reject the cultural worldviews of their opposing CT narratives. Seven of the ten of the egalitarians I spoke with had specifically engaged with the school lunch program advocacy. Among my small sample of interviewees, being a strong egalitarian was associated
with a proclivity toward advocacy efforts, for example, like the 17-point egalitarian who remains a daily volunteer in the elementary cafeteria of the school where their children have since graduated. The strongest CT worldview score I measured belonged to an 18-point egalitarian who serves as PTA President at their child’s school and is active in child-centered advocacy.

I move now to a presentation of narratives which combines stakeholder’s dominant CT types (as identified by the CT survey) with the NPF characters I identified in interview transcripts. These findings will allow us to understand how the CT categories help us think about the variation of the content within each stakeholder’s preferred policy narrative.

**Cultural Theory Myths of Nature Explain Variation in Narrative Characters and Plots**

As shown in the following table, the egalitarian narratives in my findings clearly implicate stakeholder beliefs around systemic and institutional villains (e.g. lobbies for dairy, corn, soy, and wheat, governmental organizations and “shadowy figures”). Using CT as means to derive meaning from the data I found and reflecting again on the egalitarian’s *myth of nature as ephemeral*, the finding of a villain centric *institution as villain* plot seems justified.

Further, acknowledging the CT notion that egalitarians believe “human beings are born good but are corrupted by evil institutions” (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 34) from which they need to be liberated, we can also understand why stakeholder stories feature community advocates as the resounding narrative hero characters. Across the board interviewees mentioned that children are on the losing end of the story (e.g. the victims), particularly those children whose families qualify for the NSLP free and reduced subsidy. Coming to these children’s aid thus becomes the primary plot motivation for the egalitarian’s story moral.
### Table 9: Interviewee CT Types with Policy Narrative Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>CT Type</th>
<th>Villains Identified</th>
<th>Victims Identified</th>
<th>Hero Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Strong/Egalitarian</td>
<td>“the dairy lobby,” federal government programs, and the current administration choices and people making decisions at various levels</td>
<td>Children and also “the lobbies if there were a change in policy”</td>
<td>Community Advocates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie</td>
<td>Weak/Egalitarian</td>
<td>Rule makers, Congress</td>
<td>Children who qualify for subsidy</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Weak/Egalitarian</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Anyone in food service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delia</td>
<td>Strong/Egalitarian</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Children whose families “almost” qualify for subsidy as they will have to pay full price</td>
<td>Community Advocates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Strong/Egalitarian</td>
<td>Community members who don’t prioritize schools</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>Strong/Egalitarian</td>
<td>“Groups funneling processed food to school lunch programs, making it easy and cheap to do so”</td>
<td>Children whose family couldn’t afford lunch if the program were discontinued</td>
<td>Parent and Nutrition Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Weak/Individualist</td>
<td>“Big Ag…corn, soy, and wheat”</td>
<td>Children who qualify for subsidy</td>
<td>Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>Strong/Egalitarian</td>
<td>“A shadowy figure that I don’t really understand.” and also the milk producers</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Nutrition Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issac</td>
<td>Strong/Egalitarian</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Strong/Egalitarian</td>
<td>“I don't necessarily see people as bad. just people may be making poor decisions or not having enough information to make a decision or being put in a situation where you're being asked to choose one thing over another.”</td>
<td>Children who qualify for subsidy, in particular kids who may not have adequate nutrition at home. “Sometimes they develop behavioral problems”</td>
<td>Community Advocates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Strong/Egalitarian</td>
<td>“the ones who believe that hot dogs and high salt food content is acceptable because it already meets the minimum guideline that's there”</td>
<td>Children who qualify for subsidy</td>
<td>Community Advocates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As we can see in the prior table, a stakeholders’ dominant CT worldview appears systematically associated with the policy narrative content they stressed in interviews: Egalitarians vilify systemic villains (e.g. evil or misguided institutions) and likewise champion community advocates, thus underscoring support for the villain centric plot finding described previously under research Q1.

Exploring the minutia of variation among the school lunch stories brought me to the answer to my 3rd research question which explores the difference in priorities and program goals between local and national school lunch policy implementation.

Research Q3: How do local food stories and policies compare to national school lunch program goals and priorities?

My research inquiry began by exploring the varying policy narratives in the Corvallis school lunch environment (research Q1), and then progressed to an evaluation of cultural worldviews as a means to document stakeholders within their dominant CT type, and provide an understanding of how varying CT worldviews may generate variation in policy narrative content (research Q2). From the findings of these two questions we learn what Corvallis stakeholders want in terms of (1) narrative form (characters, plots, morals,) and (2) narrative content (their CT orientation and how it shows up in the school food narratives). I turn now to a comparison of local priorities with the national lunch program and the local implementation of these school lunch policies.

I identified two predominant CT worldviews among Corvallis stakeholders with my CT survey, the egalitarian and the individualist. In order to compare the local to the national, I now
breakdown the national policy along the same dimensions. I offer the table below which proposes how CT worldviews manifest in school lunch policy narratives and implementation. These assumptions are justified by recent CT research, which I also cite in my findings below.

Table 10 Operationalizing CT in School Lunch Policy Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDIVIDUALIST National School Lunch Policy Narratives</th>
<th>EGALITARIAN Corvallis Stakeholders Policy Narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Grid, Low Group</td>
<td>Low Grid, High Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflects libertarian values and self-reliance (Thompson et al., 1990)</td>
<td>Exhibit strong group alliance and lean on communitarian values and preferences (Zanocco &amp; Jones, 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values freedom (Swedlow et al., 2016)</td>
<td>Values equity (Swedlow et al., 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values conspicuous, hedonistic, and cosmopolitan consumption (Seyfang, 2007a)</td>
<td>Values sustainability (Seyfang, 2007a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitively market-based (Seyfang, 2007a)</td>
<td>Values reduced consumption (Seyfang, 2007a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values “green” economic growth (Seyfang, 2007a)</td>
<td>Values local and organic food (Seyfang, 2007a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less likely than egalitarian to value compromise (Zanocco &amp; Jones, 2018)</td>
<td>Values compromise in political decision making (Zanocco &amp; Jones, 2018)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School Lunch Policy Reflects an Individualist Worldview

While my earlier findings illustrate that an egalitarian cultural narrative dominates Corvallis stakeholder stories, a culture of individualism seems present in the national school lunch policy and also reflected in policy implemented at the local level. For example, while school lunch programs are buoyed by subsidies and other USDA funded grants and government programs, they are not paid for through a school district’s general fund, so they operate as a business and must remain self-sustaining. Such market-based enterprises thus reflect what Thompson et al. (1990) described as a culture of competition which seeks economic growth (see
also Seyfang, 2007). Locally, Corvallis district representatives report that margins are tight, and cost is always a factor. Resultantly, Nutrition Services has instituted a policy of maximizing choice within budget constraints. The individualist low-grid, low-group quadrant also values freedom of choice (Seyfang, 2007), as seen in the Corvallis elementary school menus which offer three entree selections per day including an “alternative” option, with best sellers getting top billing and repetition on the menu. A competitive market-based cultural worldview (Seyfang, 2007a) is also illustrated in the district by recent efforts to boost participation, building up the market with cash paying customers to reduce a budget shortfall.

In terms of strategy, Corvallis school lunch administrators appear to be appealing to the leading egalitarian belief system in the district. For example, the 2018-2019 Corvallis menu data has reflected a shift toward egalitarian priorities for change, particularly around quality and equal access to “healthful” and “culturally relevant” choices (Gibson et al., 2018). Despite loud protests around access to fresh fruits and vegetables, the district emphasizes that a full salad bar is offered to all children who come through the lunch line, and there is no limit on the amount of offered salad bar items children can select. Such rallying around common goals and “recognizing a plurality of approaches” is in line with previous CT scholarship in the local and organic food environment (Seyfang, 2007a).

**Egalitarians Compromise for School Lunch Policy**

Recent scholarship evaluating cultural worldviews and political process preferences suggests that egalitarians are more apt to value compromise in the policy decision making process (Zanocco & Jones, 2018). I found this to be the case in Corvallis where egalitarian school lunch policy advocates have agreed to meet with the school district to discuss the problem and attempt to work out a compromise solution within the framework of the national program.
policy. Various interviewees stressed the necessity of engaging in discussion with others of varying ideologies, citing the importance of balancing resources and sharing education to effectively serve the district and all of its children.

While a few interviewees did suggest a complete program overhaul (e.g. striking the use of USDA subsidies or outsourcing production,) most proposed smaller changes to the national policy, such as improving flavors and spice profiles, and the inclusion of more locally sourced and culturally relevant menu items for a more universal appeal. Interviewees suggested that such improvements might result in more purchases.

During community meetings parents asked that children be directed to pass through the salad bar first before claiming their entree in order that they might begin by choosing (and munching) on fresh vegetable options first (Garfield Elementary School PTA, 2017; Gibson et al., 2018). Interviewees also proposed that the district reconsider how their three-per-day choices on the menu were constructed, suggesting the newer parent-favored “healthful” items be shifted so they would not compete side by side with national lunch program staples like corndogs and cheeseburgers. These “choice architecture” techniques, (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), would be a compromise as they are individualist cultural attributes around choice, but they also nest cozily with story morals containing egalitarian notions of health and sustainability.

Façade of “healthy choices”

Appealing to these egalitarian ideals of health and sustainability would seem to be an expedient choice for an individualist cultural worldview which values “green” economic growth (Seyfang, 2007a). Notwithstanding district efforts to crowdsourced input from the community, however, some interviewees reported that many of their concerns and feedback have manifested in only minor alterations, such as standardized pizza dishes renamed with exotic or contemporary
titles like flatbread, with base ingredients unchanged. Another issue described was the continued focus on starch-heavy dishes (such as patty and burger sandwiches) which feature USDA subsidies.

Despite the variety of choices offered to families and the integration of fresh, local ingredients with messaging about sustainability and wellness, the district’s lunch program budget shortage remains. Corvallis families are just not purchasing enough lunches to make up the cash shortfall. These types of concerns suggest a persistent alignment of local policy with national priorities, and a continued disparity between local priorities and local policy implementation.

**Hero Centric vs. Villain Centric Narrative**

As described in my findings to research Q1 and Q2, my project explored policy narrative plots in two dimensions, hero centric and villain centric. These dimensions were further deconstructed to identify both *Institution as Hero* and *Institution as Villain* story elements.

Recalling the original goals and purpose of the national school lunch policy we see a hero centric success story—government programs operating as heroes, stimulating farm markets whilst saving child victims from the systemic villains of poverty and food insecurity. It would seem, however, according to Corvallis stakeholders, that these specific character alignments, plot, and motivations linger only as an artifact of history. Rather, the egalitarian majority in Corvallis has flipped the narrative making the institution the villain who implements villainous government programs that propagate childhood obesity and poor nutrition as side effects of poverty. To the Corvallis residents I spoke with, their hero centric narrative would instead spotlight egalitarian notions of equity, sustainability, and social justice to help children, in contrast to systemic villainy perpetuated by government policies.
While I identified minor variety within the spectrum of egalitarian CT worldviews held by stakeholders (see findings for research Q2 above,) I found distinct variation along the narrative policy plotlines at play within the local and larger school lunch policy environments. I also found that regardless of the CT worldview held by interviewees, the victim characters they identified were the same as those presented in formal policy documents. So, therefore, what is interesting here to my findings is what remains constant amid the stories (e.g. the victim characters and the moral of the story), and what varies (e.g. the motivation and plotlines). Thus, we have two stories, the institution as hero and the institution as villain, and while there exists a congruent motivation amid both plots to save the same victims (e.g. children) from poor health and poverty (e.g. the moral of the story), the protagonist in the original story was a hero, but the government program is now painted as a villain. How the characters go about their “projects” and how they are perceived in doing so varies. Which is to say, one man’s hero is another’s villain, and one can tell a different story from the same facts and evidence depending on whether we choose to focus on the hero or the villain. Such variation helps explain the contention and discontent amid discussion of priorities in the Corvallis school lunch environment.

My review of the varying school lunch policy narratives is intended to help inform the Corvallis School District. Having documented the varying narrative structures and content in an effort to provide context for actors’ beliefs and preferences, I now discuss the findings in the context of narrative strategy and policy prescription.
DISCUSSION

Limitations and Future Work

This paper reflects recent applications of the NPF (Gray & Jones, 2016) which pioneer qualitative methods with the historically quantitative framework, adding fieldwork including interviews and participant observation. Working alone on this project throughout the 2017-2019 school years I was able to delve into the motivations of a limited (albeit strongly skewed egalitarian) sample of eleven Corvallis stakeholders. As a single researcher embedded in the field the scope of this project was limited by my individual capacity and physical bandwidth. Future projects of a similar design would benefit from more resources, an ample team of researchers, and a larger population sample for interviews and survey. As I chose to focus specifically on the Corvallis, Oregon 509J school district, limitations of my sample size and selection bias should be considered before drawing generalized conclusions for surrounding communities.

Public policy theory suggests that stakeholders wishing to build support in their community benefit from an educated coalition with a shared agenda (Jenkins-Smith, Nohrstedt, Weible, & Sabatier, 2014). Thus, research such as mine is exploratory in nature, intended to formalize stakeholder understanding of the nutrition and eating environments in the Corvallis 509J school district in order to help establish priorities for a more rigorous investigation in the future.

Prospective research could include an investigation of barriers to program participation and further generation of ideas for process improvement. Prospects for future research include an electronic survey distributed to all elementary school families, and potentially expanding the sample to include the larger middle and high school parent populations in the Corvallis district.
Supplemental research into plots and morals in the Corvallis lunch environment should prove fruitful and broaden our understanding of stakeholder motivations and rationale for action.

Acknowledging these limitations, I present the following study implications and recommended policy prescriptions intended to help stakeholders navigate contention, increase collaboration, and allow community consensus around practical policy goals.

**Theoretical Implications**

The purpose of theory is to help the researcher explain observations, clarify meaning, and make reasonable predictions. Thus, a goal of theory-led research is to elucidate interesting and innovative areas for future study. From its beginnings NPF scholarship has highlighted the power of characters to move the plot (McBeth, Shanahan, & Jones, 2005), the “arc of action” in the policy story (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228). Extant NPF literature has surveyed the influence of both heroes (M. D. Jones, 2010; Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Lane, 2013) and villains (Shanahan, Adams, Jones, & McBeth, 2014; Shanahan et al., 2013) to drive persuasion and motivate action (Crow & Jones, 2018). Notwithstanding such scholarship, however, the NPF has struggled with identifying story types and generalizable plots. To innovate and add to the NPF this paper specifically identifies story types and explores policy narrative plots in two dimensions, villain centric and hero centric. My goal to identify the elements which divide and yoke the *Institution as Villain* and *Institution as Hero* plotlines at play in the Corvallis school lunch environment.

Further, this project has also shown that NPF scholarship, traditionally a quantitative enterprise can also be qualitative and inductive, yet rigorous.
Substantive Implications

This paper set out to engage the NPF and CT in order to identify the perspectives shaping competing narratives in the Corvallis district’s school lunch environment and compare them to the national school lunch program goals and priorities. What I discovered through my analysis was that in both the original national school lunch narrative and the Corvallis school food stories, motivation stems from a desire to help children. Whom these narratives implicate as villain and hero, and how these characters go about manifesting the moral of the story differs. On one hand, the hero centric plot spotlights the institution as the heroic character, who through sustainability efforts is saving children from systemic consequences of poverty, including poor nutrition, poor health, and obesity. On the other hand, the villain centric plotline proposes victims be liberated from a villainous institution which begets the very same obstacles. In reflection, we observe there is opportunity to find common ground amid the contention.

My research findings indicate an egalitarian majority among Corvallis school lunch policy advocates, contrasted to an individualist narrative embedded in national school lunch policy. I have discussed this stark contrast and the questions it raises about the study’s limitations in prior sections of this paper. Nevertheless, in the case of both the local Corvallis and historic national narratives, policy is intended to favor the victims, those children who rely on the school lunch program. Further, in review of both the plotlines (e.g. hero centric and villain centric), and the morals of the story, if we could move the variable of blame (e.g. flex the narrative discussion such that blame falls on a mutually acceptable villain) both sides would seem amenable to policy changes.
**Interrogate the seeming lack of cultural plurality**

Circling back to my discourse about the variance among CT worldviews in the Corvallis community (see research Q2), I would be remiss if I fail to discuss the impact of the largely egalitarian population in my sample. To some policy theorists, cultural plurality is seen as an asset, establishing a base range of strategies to respond to social challenges and problems, as well as equipping a community with tools for learning (Mamadouh, 1999, p. 33). As the Corvallis, Oregon school district is seeking a collaborative problem solution to the lunch policy conundrum (Gibson et al., 2018), one in which diversity is invited (Corvallis School District 509-J, 2017), the lack of cultural diversity in narrative types I identified is a curious finding. This finding is likely a result of my initial sampling frame (the Parent Menu Committee) who were already motivated by a desire for communal advocacy. On the other hand, loud voices within the leadership of the advocacy group could also belie diversity within the coalition’s ranks. Regardless, the lack of plurality in narrative voices could explain the contentious atmosphere of the Corvallis school food environment. In light of the limitations of my research, further examination of CT worldviews in the community is advised over a broader sample. *(See the limitations and future work proposition in the prior section of this paper.)*

As an egalitarian narrative would seem to be the most vocal in the Corvallis community, it is important to point out what Thompson and his cohort described in *Cultural Theory* (1990): that policy analysts should reflect on the lack of pluralistic voices in the throng. Mary Douglas too exhorted the importance that the dominant culture not “drive the others underground or reduce any of them to silence” (Douglas, n.d.). Equally, as Seyfang’s CT scholarship suggests, national policy makers and local parent advocates may be well served to acknowledge the
“disparate motivations” and “multiple understandings” which exist in the policy environment (Seyfang, 2007a, p. 119), and seek a collaborative solution.

What this means on the ground in Corvallis is compromise. As Zanocco and Jones identified (2018), the egalitarian worldview is more amenable to compromise in policy decision making than the individualist. Thus, egalitarian advocates could shift away from their villain centric “institution as villain” narrative—rather to embrace a hero centric plot in collaboration with the district’s Nutrition Services—a plot which will help all of them reach their desired moral of the story. From the standpoint of the individualist it would be in the best interest of the institution (in other words “expedient”) to collaborate with community advocates. This collaborative path forward echoes NPF scholarship around strategies of congruence, collaboration and issue containment (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 245), which I discuss in the following policy prescription section.

**Policy Prescriptions**

My research found that across CT worldviews school lunch stakeholders identify the same narrative victims, and favor story morals which serve to reduce harm to these children. Likewise, language pertaining to sustainability is common ground in the narrative content of both local egalitarians and the national individualist leaning school lunch policy. These commonalities in purpose and motivation of the hero character represent cross cultural congruent beliefs which NPF scholarship suggests may benefit coalition stability and collaboration (McBeth et al., 2014). While the villain centric story sets the individualist and egalitarians at odd with one another, a hero centric plot allows stakeholders to unite as Seyfang (2007) described under “flexible interpretations, despite varying CT worldview.”
Supported by NPF research on inter and intra coalition cohesion (Shanahan, Jones, & McBeth, 2011), the potency of a coalition’s efforts can be measured by the strength and stability of their shared policy beliefs. This relationship between “coalition glue and policy outcomes” suggests such that coalitions with a strong, stable core of policy beliefs are more likely to influence policy outcome (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 245). I describe one such relevant strategy below.

“*If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em!*”

One prescription for the district is to flex the interpretation of narrative villain. In this prescription the food story would be revised to transfer the villain characteristic from the institution to the food itself. In other words, rather than vilifying the food service program for the foods they serve, egalitarian advocates would instead rally against villainous food manufacturers and work with the institution to facilitate the addition of “healthier” replacements in school lunch menus. This adjustment to the narrative would allow the institution (with community help) to provide the solution—swapping out what is perceived as unhealthy menu elements in favor of items the community perceives as healthful. The Corvallis school district would be a willing hero and is already working toward this through their health and wellness efforts and community engagement events.

Some might perceive this story’s morals as “*if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em,*” however, it allows stakeholders to unify over common beliefs and shared values. This strategy also flips the narrative from villain centric back to hero centric. NPF scholarship suggests that narrative strategies which invoke heroes are likely more effective in generating a positive affective responses (M. D. Jones, 2010, 2014; Shanahan et al., 2013). Means to achieve such collaboration are already in play. The district is part of a 26-district purchasing group which allows the
organization to receive lower prices through volume purchasing (Gibson et al., 2018). Community advocates should jump on this knowledge, recognizing that this program will not only allow Nutrition Services to network for best practices and menu ideas, but provide the public more information on what other solutions are available in the market. Highlighting successful solutions will also take advantage of an availability bias. This method also appeals to individualist values, potentially generating a market share for items families deem as “healthier”, allowing gluten free, nut free, and allergy friendly brands to intentionally package serving sized items or a bulk box for use in schools. Such cross-cultural compromise is also advocated as a means to achieve policy support (M. D. Jones, 2011).

This solution which brands the institution the hero harnesses the power of the elites and uses it for the benefit of those currently marginalized. This should appeal to egalitarian values of equity, and cross pollinate CT worldviews to contribute to compromise. As the NPF suggests that individuals are drawn to congruent ideas, (M. D. Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 344; McBeth et al., 2014, p. 235), I discuss the following Institution as Hero narrative plot strategy which highlights sustainability efforts already underway in the district.

**Waste Avoidance Strategy**

A policy which emphasizes the reduction of food waste through sustainability and recycling efforts—issues which Corvallis stakeholders have already asserted are essential—has already coalesced support from both individualist and egalitarian cultural worldviews. This path forward also links local egalitarian wants with national individualist policies. For the individualist such a program would remove waste from the supply chain, and for the egalitarian promote sustainability and equity (stated Corvallis district goals). This collaboration is expedient for the individualist in that it helps drive consumption and green economic development, and it is
worthy of compromise for the egalitarians who favor social justice and interpret waste reduction efforts as reduced consumption.

This merger of belief system and strategy amounts to a clumsy solution (M. Verweij & Thompson, 2006). Such a clumsy solution offers a creative combination of the opposing CT worldviews, beliefs, and strategies (M. Verweij & Thompson, 2006). It is not uncommon in politics to find such strange bedfellows and it recognizes the district administration’s current interest in collaborative problem solving. This discussion of how and why stakeholders come together to compromise suggests the necessity of comprehensible and informative policy communications. I detail opportunities for improved policy communication in the next section of this paper.

**Improve Policy Communication**

Over the past few years an investment has been made by Nutrition Services in marketing collateral, including photos of the food prepared and served. On one hand, parents and caregivers are asking for tasty options that kids are willing to eat, but they are simultaneously requesting food education, and a consideration of what experts believe is healthy and nutritious. The latter requests, for education around healthy choices and the science of nutrition illustrate the community’s robust egalitarian cultural narrative. Communicating about “what” is healthy and nutritious, however, is a thorny task.

School lunch policy communication, e.g. the documents used by Corvallis Nutrition Services to promote the policy and educate community members about program changes was a lively topic among interviewees. The NPF posits that narratives play a distinct role in such policy communications thus the Corvallis district should be encouraged to dig a little deeper into the stories through which stakeholders coordinate and engage about school lunch policy.
Recognizing the strength of congruence within the hero centric “institution as hero” narrative described earlier in my discussion, the district may be well served to employ this type of hero centric plot in their school lunch communication strategies.

In Corvallis much of the communication about school lunch is provided through printed menus and the Nutrition Services website. Families I met with during field research shared their opinions about these school lunch marketing documents (collateral), and the most popular piece of collateral described was the monthly menu. It is often posted in a prominent place in a family’s home, such as a refrigerator. A generic menu therefore represents a missed opportunity for the district to engage in food education and storytelling. Vibrant marketing collateral can be used to clarify program goals and policy solutions (the narrative’s plots and morals).

Examples of this type of plot and associated characters can be found in the Lunch Lady graphic novels by Jarrett J. Krosoczka (see illustration in figure 7 (Krosoczka, 2014). These types of narratives feature an institutional hero who serves their community, fights back against childhood hunger and poor food choices, and in a nutshell does good by helping victims navigate the school lunch environment.

Figure 7: Krosoczka graphic novels feature Lunch Lady as Hero
CONCLUSION

District discussion of Corvallis school lunch policy has been mired in contention for the past several years and a collaborative solution is being pursued. Recognizing that narrative and human response to stories are foundational to human communication, mental processing, and reason (McBeth et al., 2014), a narrative approach offers promise for problem solving in the Corvallis district. This research project proposes that by deconstructing a subject’s food stories we can identify their values and come to appreciate how they know and understand food policy. From this place of insight, we can then offer policy prescriptions which appeal to stakeholders with varying cultural perspectives on heroism and villainy.

Through qualitative interviews, a brief survey, and a review of policy documents I sought classic narrative structures including characters (e.g. heroes, villains, and victims), plots, and morals, along with cultural narrative content. My enquiry found noticeable disparity within a spectrum of egalitarian cultural worldviews, and a well-defined variance in narrative policy plotlines, with both a hero centric and villain centric plot in conflict. Determining which plot is in play mandated that I dig deep into motivations, preferences, and perspectives to identify how stakeholders are making sense of policy narratives. That not one of my egalitarian interviewees sees themselves or their children as victims is telling, as is the detail that not one of them appreciated their voluntary purchase of the school lunch as a disruptive act of heroism in a system that they see as victimizing the poor. To a degree perhaps the egalitarian’s villain centric plot provides distraction from actionable goals, and a loss of perspective on the opportunity to compromise. Egalitarians may wish to take heed, however, lest they tumble into fatalism, which Cultural Theory suggests is “the cultural equivalent of compost,” comprised of among other
factsions those “excluded from egalitarianism because they cannot muster sufficient commitment” (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 93).

To establish meaning from my observations I employed CT and the NPF which together established a framework to capture belief systems commonly used by individuals to make sense of public policy. The implications my research findings are complex. For example, one interpretation of the removal of contentious items like the “walking taco” from school lunch menus is that of heroism. To extrapolate such meaning we have to assume the institution is a hero, actively “doing good,” consummating a commitment to expand access to wholesome ingredients for the community it serves (e.g. an egalitarian worldview). On the other hand, it is also conceivable that removal of this item was simply low-hanging fruit, a strategic removal by a more neutral leaning institution which sees the value of appeasing the opposition to quell advocacy, sell more of more popular items, and create economic growth (e.g. an individualist worldview). So, where do we go from here?

In conclusion, my limited findings establish a rational for the Corvallis school lunch policy stakeholders to compromise, improve the elements of their narrative argument, and strengthen their efforts to communicate cross culturally. Specific suggestions include coalescing support around narrative elements which appeal to both the egalitarian and individualist worldview (e.g. sustainability), and particularly those strategies which actively use heroes to promote optimism and a positive emotional response. Such efforts could be achieved through the district’s website or other disseminated communications and marketing collateral. Secondly, clarifying program goals so as to present a clear definition of policy solutions (e.g. narrative morals which reduce harm to child victims) may help inspire a sense of hope for future program success.
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Appendix A

Flowchart of Research Activity

This flow chart illustrates the processes and order in which I completed the research activity for this project.

Timeline of Research Activity

This chart illustrates a timeline of my research activity for this project. Preliminary research design began in memos in the fall of 2017 along with participant observation. Formal project proposals, IRB, and approvals occurred in the fall of 2018. Most of my field research (e.g. interviews) took place in the winter and spring of 2018. Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively over this 2-year period, and a draft of my findings submitted in Fall of 2019.
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

PROJECT TITLE: Thinking Outside of the Lunchbox:
Exploring Competing Narratives in the Corvallis 509J District School Lunch Policies

Michael Jones, Principal Investigator, Oregon State University
Cassandra Inman, Graduate Researcher, Oregon State University

Questions for Participants

1. If you could describe your relationship with food in one word or phrase, what would you say?

2. Are you the parent/guardian of a child in the district? Do you personally consume school
   provided lunches? [If no to both questions, skip to question 2vi. If yes to one or both,
   proceed with the following questions.]
   i. How many times per week does your child [or you] participate in school lunch?
   ii. Reasons for participating in school lunch?
   iii. How many times per week does your child [or you] bring a lunch from home?
   iv. If lunch is brought from home, does the parent/guardian or child pack the lunch?
   v. Reasons for not participating in school lunch?
   vi. If you had a child in the district would you participate in the school lunch?

3. Now I’d like to get your perspective on the district’s school lunch program. Generally speaking,
   what comes to mind first when you think about the school lunch?

4. What do you suppose is the goal of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP)?

5. Do you believe the program is fine as it is, or do you think the program needs changes?
   a. [If subject suggests changes are needed]
      i. What type of changes do you see as necessary?
      ii. Who would benefit from the changes you propose?
   b. [If subject suggests no changes are needed]
      i. What type of changes would you be concerned to see implemented?

6. Do you believe that school meals are healthy? Explain.

7. Do you believe children receive sufficient food from school meals? Should more or less food be
   offered? Why or why not?

8. Discussion with the district includes issues of environmental sustainability, food packaging and
   other collateral materials. Do you feel these items are relevant to a discussion of school lunch
   policy? Explain.

9. Who do you think should pay for changes in the program?

10. Do you believe school meals are offered at a fair price? Should the price be changed? Increased
    or decreased? Explain.

11. Are there good guys and bad guys when it comes to school nutrition? Explain.

12. Who do you think receives the greatest value from the National School Lunch Program as it is
    implemented today?

13. Who deserves the NSLP benefits? Who does not deserve NSLP benefits?

14. Who do you think loses under the existing policy? (In other words, who do you imagine are the
    most vulnerable to the program’s flaws?)

15. How would you describe those who would disagree with your position on this policy?

16. If you disagree/agree with the policy as it stands, what might make you change your mind?
    i. Who do you think is making the rules?
    ii. Do you think it possible to sway the decision makers?
    iii. How do you suppose change will manifest?
## Cultural Theory Survey (M. D. Jones, 2011)

### SURVEY QUESTIONS

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For each of the statements below, please circle the response that best characterizes how you feel about the statement, where 1 = Disagree, 2 = Neutral, and 3 = Agree.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It would be pointless to make serious plans in such an uncertain world.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society works best if power is shared equally.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our society is in trouble because we don’t obey those in authority.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even the disadvantaged should have to make their own way in the world.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No matter how hard we try, the course of our lives is largely determined by forces outside our control.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even if some people are at a disadvantage, it is best for society to let people succeed or fail on their own</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>What our society needs is a fairness revolution to make the distribution of goods more equal.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>The best way to get ahead in life is to do what you are told to do.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Society would be much better off if we imposed strict and swift punishment on those who break the rules.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>We are all better off when we compete as individuals.</td>
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<td>It is our responsibility to reduce the difference in income between the rich and the poor.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

Cultural Theory Survey Questions & Categories (M. D. Jones, 2011)

a. [Individualism]

1. Even if some people are at a disadvantage, it is best for society to let people succeed or fail on their own.

2. Even the disadvantaged should have to make their own way in the world.

3. We are all better off when we compete as individuals.

b. [Hierarchism]

4. The best way to get ahead in life is to do what you are told to do.

5. Our society is in trouble because we don’t obey those in authority.

6. Society would be much better off if we imposed strict and swift punishment on those who break the rules.

c. [Egalitarianism]

7. What our society needs is a fairness revolution to make the distribution of goods more equal.

8. Society works best if power is shared equally.

9. It is our responsibility to reduce the difference in income between the rich and the poor.

d. [Fatalism]

10. Most of the important things that take place in life happen by random choice.

11. No matter how hard we try, the course of our lives is largely determined by forces outside our control.

12. It would be pointless to make serious plans in such an uncertain world.
APPENDIX E

Recruitment Guide

|Thinking Outside of the Lunchbox: Exploring Competing Narratives in the Corvallis 509J District School Lunch Policies|

To _______ (Whom it may concern),

My name is Cassy Inman and I am a graduate student in the School of Public Policy at Oregon State University. I am a research assistant for Professor Michael Jones of Oregon State University, who is conducting research regarding cultural food narratives and school lunch programs. I am contacting you in order to see if you are willing to participate in an interview as part of our study of these efforts.

The approximately 60-90 minute interviews for this study are targeted at individuals in the Corvallis School District with direct knowledge of the school lunch program, including both program administrators and participants. This research is designed to improve the public’s understanding of the cultural narratives toward food and food policy that persist in the district and which inform the Corvallis school lunch program.

Because of your position with the district (staff, administrator, parent, caregiver), your views are particularly important for this study. If you agree, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, the information you provide will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law.

Your response is greatly appreciated. Please feel free to include any questions you may have.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Cassy Inman, Graduate Student Researcher
541-233-1245, innancas@oregonstate.edu

Michael Jones, Principal Investigator
Professor, School of Public Policy
100D Bexell Hall, Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon 97331
541-737-3655, Michael.Jones@oregonstate.edu
APPENDIX F

Verbal Consent Document

PROJECT TITLE: Thinking Outside of the Lunchbox: Exploring Competing Narratives in the Corvallis 509J District School Lunch Policies

Principle Investigator: Michael Jones
Oregon State University
Verbal Consent Document
12/04/2018

Introduction and Verbal Consent Guide
As we discussed previously over (email/phone), I am a graduate student at Oregon State University, where I am working with Professor Michael Jones on a project studying cultural food narratives and school lunch programs. The approximately 60-90 minute interviews for this study are targeted at individuals in the Corvallis School District with direct knowledge of the school lunch program, including both program administrators and participants. Interview participants will also be asked to complete a brief printed survey. This research is designed to improve the public’s understanding of the cultural narratives toward food and food policy that persist in the district and which inform the Corvallis school lunch program.

Your decision not to participate or to participate in this study will not impact your relationship with the researcher. If you agree to participate in the study, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. I am providing you with my contact information [Information will be faxed/emails if interview is conducted over the phone], and you should feel free to get back in touch with me if you have any questions for me about this study. I also have included contact information for the Institutional Review Board at Oregon State University if you have any questions about your rights as a study participant.

Would you be willing to participate in the study, and in particular, to talk with me about your cultural narratives toward food and the school lunch program? If you agree, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, the information you provide will be kept confidential. The security and confidentiality of information collected online cannot be guaranteed. Confidentiality will be kept to the extent permitted with the technology being used. Information collected on line can be intercepted, corrupted, lost, destroyed, arrive late or incomplete and made public. There is a chance we could disclose information that identifies you.

We do not know what studies we might do in the future. We would like your permission now to use or share your responses without having to ask you again in the future. We will only use your responses in other studies regarding the school lunch policy. We will remove your name before we share your responses with other researchers. If you consent to the use of your name in publication you may withdraw your data at any time. If you have chosen to keep your identity confidential in publication we will not be able to remove your information from the larger data set once data collection is complete, therefore you should not participate unless you consent to the future use of your information.

Do you give consent for your identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study?

So that I don’t miss any information, I would like to ask your permission to record our discussion. As soon as the information from this discussion has been transcribed, the tape will be destroyed. Do I have your permission to record our discussion?

Contact Information:
If you have any questions concerning the study, please contact myself at (541) 223-1245 or by email at innancas@oregonstate.edu, or Professor Michael Jones at (541) 737-3655 or by email at Michael.Jones@oregonstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights or welfare as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office, at (541) 737-8008 or by email at IRB@oregonstate.edu.
APPENDIX G

Positionality Statement

The subject of food policy and narrative communication is not new to me. I have spent much of my adult life following an integrated, and perhaps unorthodox, approach to health and wellness; I see the world through the lens of food; food consumption, food digestion, and food elimination. Two popular maxims which speak to me include: “The road to health is paved with good intestines,” (Sherry Rogers), and “You are what you eat, what you digest, and what you do not eliminate” (Brenda Watson). As a long-time natural products marketer, defining my philosophical approach is a bit of an enigma; I float between an ardent passion for service to others and a vehemently self-righteous commitment to what I believe is the path to good health. Narrative has served me as a key driver for successful marketing techniques. I truly love sharing stories and employing storytelling as a method to inspire holistic, political, and emotional growth.

This research project offers me an opportunity to find practical ways to integrate my learning style, epistemology, and ontology to the topic, and situate myself within a theoretical framework. To this end, as Alan Peshkin describes in his article, “Nature of Interpretation in Qualitative Research” (Peshkin, 2000), I recognize that for my research to be taken seriously, I must acknowledge the lens through which I look at the information I gather (Peshkin, 2000). This includes my research subjects and site, the artifacts and data I collect, and even what I select to include in my discussion and analysis (Peshkin, 2000).

Much of my passion for the subject of nutrition comes from wanting to help share what I see as truth; or "what's really going on” in an attempt to enlighten others. This said, I consider my concept of “healthy living” as a privilege (Freedhoff, 2016), one that I need to check, lest I
forget that there are many people who are unable to even access what I take for granted. I’ve also come to understand that issues like food choice are particularly imbued with cultural meaning. Diagnoses become wrapped up in politics and economics, and when we focus causality on the individual, we end up causing stigma and social discrimination (Puhl & Latner, 2007). This type of discussion is akin to bullying.

Employing my personal passion for storytelling, I engage my intellectual goals in a practical and pragmatic way, helping others achieve equitable access to healthy choices. My core interests of communication and cognition are particularly relevant themes in the context of the Corvallis school lunch agenda. I approach this research project through these lenses, and I believe my professional background will offer a novel view. Further, I propose that if my research enables individuals to share their stories, they may be granted access to more appropriate services which better meet their needs, versus a generalized economic or rational approach.

Acknowledging my personal relationship with the subject matter also addresses the researcher’s challenge of understanding context (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 73). My data analysis also reflects my positionality. As a trained nutritional consultant and the parent of an elementary student in the Corvallis School District, I admit my lack of objectivity on this issue. I have a personal investment to successfully advocate policy for just and sustainable options. Throughout my analysis I lean on scientific findings regarding childhood health and wellness, but also acknowledge the varying social and cultural perspectives that form my respondent’s points of view. Thus, I promote parents’ agency for advocacy. I wish to build trust between parents and the district, using rich descriptions and storytelling as empirical evidence.
Finally, as a researcher who embraces the concept of an emancipatory approach to my studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25), through my academic efforts I hope to ignite social change, taking a lesson from Robert Reich, (former US Labor Secretary under President Bill Clinton) who describes the following three elements necessary to promote social change: “a widening gap between ideal and reality; broad public knowledge of that gap; and widespread sense of efficacy—the ability to narrow the gap” (Robert Reich, 2018). As a member of the Corvallis community, my research is on behalf of families like mine. By documenting and sharing community stories I strive to uncover the facts surrounding this issue in order to successfully educate the public and gather public support and resources for change.