

## **Living Proof: Autobiographical Political Argument in *We are the 99 Percent* and *We are the 53 Percent***

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People often cite life experiences as evidence in political arguments, though personal experience is not always generalizable. How do these arguments work? In this paper, I consider the rhetorical dynamics of “autobiographical political argument” by examining *We are the 99 Percent* and *We are the 53 Percent*, two blogs that use autobiographical stories to make discursive points. I argue that these autobiographical appeals efficiently use all three of Aristotle’s persuasive “proofs”—logos (logic), ethos (credibility), and pathos (emotion). Then I show that many of the blogs’ stories focus on “redemption,” a theme personality psychologists have found emphasized in the narrative identities, or “stories of self,” of Americans. I argue that autobiographical political arguments draw on the cultural and psychological power of life stories. These findings are evidence of how “narrative rationality” enables public engagement.

*Keywords: narrative identity, rhetoric, redemption, Occupy Wall Street, inequality*

*I’m a U.S. Navy veteran. After 6 months of unemployment I got a job that barely pays enough to keep a roof [over] my family’s heads and put food on our table. My car was repossessed and we don’t have a phone to call 911 in case my 8 month old stops breathing. We have no health insurance. We’re so far behind on bills that I have no idea how we’re going to get caught up. I’m proud to be a veteran but I’m sickened by the way our government has thrown so many of us to the wayside. We are the 99%. (September 2011)*

*3 years ago I started my own business with nothing. Finally after 3 years I’m starting to see profit! I work a 2<sup>nd</sup> job over 40 hours a week, and I go to college full time! I do all this while raising and providing for my 2 toddler sons. I don’t have a babysitter, and can’t afford daycare, so instead of complaining and being lazy, I found a 2<sup>nd</sup> job where I could work from home. I don’t take handouts, I don’t ask questions, I work and work hard! . . . I AM the 53%!!! (October 2011)*

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In autumn 2011, amidst the pitched rhetorical battles over inequality and the Occupy Wall Street protest, two competing blogs were launched. *We are the 99 Percent* came first, before the tents had even been set up in Zuccotti Park (We are the 99 Percent, [ca. 2011]). It was a simple Tumblr featuring pictures of people holding up handwritten signs that told personal stories of economic hardship, like the one from the Navy veteran above, and ended with the statement, “We are the 99 percent” (or, sometimes, “I am the 99 percent”). *We are the 53 Percent* was the conservative response (We are the 53 Percent, [ca. 2011]). It made a case for personal responsibility, using the same format of short, autobiographical stories.

The rhetorical device these blogs employed was not unique. People cite life experience in social and political arguments all the time, so much so that the technique seems obvious, natural. One can imagine a caveman grunting, “I had to spear a mammoth when I was a child, and it made me a good hunter. Everyone should have to do it.” But even ubiquitous behaviors deserve explanation, especially when, as in this case, they don’t necessarily make sense. After all, there is arguably nothing *less* generalizable than individual life experience. How do people use personal experience to make points in political discourse?

In this paper, I use the *We are the 99 Percent* and *We are the 53 Percent* blogs to consider the rhetorical dynamics at work in what I call “autobiographical political argument”—the use of one’s critical life experience to make a political point. I begin by defining the concept and reviewing relevant literature, which provides a few possible insights into this technique. Then I draw on Aristotelian rhetoric to examine how these persuasive appeals work. Aristotle theorized (and more recent research has substantially confirmed) that there are three kinds of rhetorical proofs available to would-be persuaders: *logos* (reason), *ethos* (credibility), and *pathos* (emotion). Each of these elements can take on a different weight in a given argument, so researchers have understood some arguments to be *logo-centric*, others *etho-centric*, and others *patho-centric* (Gottweis, 2006). But when I tried to categorize the posts on the *99 Percent* and *53 Percent* blogs in this manner, it didn’t work; each individual appeal relies heavily on all three elements. This is because, I contend, autobiographical political argument is an efficient strategy for deploying all three rhetorical proofs at once.

Next, I consider the social-psychological significance of the fact that these appeals are in fact autobiographical. Life stories occupy an important place in personality psychology: People use life stories to explain to ourselves who we are and how we got this way. These stories are shot through with cultural themes, and one of the key themes researchers have identified in Americans’ life stories is the notion of “redemption”—the idea that good can follow bad (McAdams, 2006). This means the stories that certain Americans tell about their lives emphasize surviving and even benefiting from adversity. Being redeemed is an important aspect of these individuals’ personal identities.

Reviewing the personal stories posted on the *99 Percent* and *53 Percent* blogs, it becomes clear that redemption is a key theme here as well, though it is deployed differently in each. Stories posted on the *53 Percent* blog carry a message that redemption is available in America for those who work hard. The *99 Percent* stories, on the other hand, suggest that in today’s America redemption is a myth. This theme reflects not only inward, onto the identity of the storyteller—but also outward, onto the “identity” of the

American economic and political systems. Life stories and the themes we use to construct them are so familiar and so powerful that we use them to understand ourselves *as well as* society.

Together, these two characteristics of autobiographical political argument—that it uses all three rhetorical proofs and draws on the cultural power of life stories—help shed light on an important facet of political discourse. The confounding thing about discourse, writes Fisher (1984), is that by traditional standards, the public often can't be rational. Traditional rationality privileges expert argument, and lay people frequently lack the specialized knowledge necessary to engage with expert arguments or data. If, for example, two economists offer contradictory arguments about causes of inequality—each with sophisticated models—how can the average voter logically decide which one to believe, much less dispute? This is why, Fisher says, discourse needs to be understood through *narrative rationality*, which can “subsume” traditional rationality and allow people to find “good reasons” in coherent, recognizable stories. It is this kind of rationality that underpins such democratic institutions as popular elections and juries of one's peers.

This paper offers evidence of how one important form of narrative rationality enables citizen engagement. Rather than choosing among traditional modes of argument, and potentially forfeiting *logos* or *ethos*, people arguing through autobiographical stories subsume all the proofs into their narratives—making their own lives the evidence about which they are experts. They also find “good reasons” in the life story themes we all recognize, drawing on their cultural and psychological power. These rhetorical moves allow them to weigh in authoritatively on issues of public import.

### **Autobiographical Political Argument**

At the time of this writing, the political world was buzzing about a new memoir-slash-missive by Senator Elizabeth Warren, in which she—as the *New Yorker* puts it— “tells the story of her life in order to make an argument about America (the middle class is trapped in a vise of debt), which is the sort of thing politicians do when they're running for office” (Lepore, 2014, para. 1). This is true of politicians, but hardly unique to them. Again, autobiographical political argument is a common technique. To take just a few examples, in the interest of illustrating the concept: We find autobiographical political argument in personal essays and op-eds—consider a piece in *Slate*, in which Alison Benedikt (2013) uses the story of her time in a “terrible public school” to make a case that everyone should send their kids to public school. We find it also in personal blogs. Consider a piece on the blog *The Political Parent* in which the author's story of how she joined a sorority supports her argument that fraternities should not be made a “scapegoat” for campus sexual assaults (The Political Parent, 2014). We find it in social media. Consider the activist Suey Park, posting on Twitter:

When I was young, boys assumed I couldn't play chess. I subversively played into that role to slowly attack while their guard was down. . . . And I would listen to them 'teach' me how to play in order to learn and study how they strategized. Continue explaining away, men. Please. (Park, 2014a, 2014b)

We find it, famously, in many “It Gets Better” videos, in which participants tell their own stories in order to persuade LGBT youth that their lives are likely to improve with time (<http://www.itgetsbetter.org>).

When you make an autobiographical political argument, you are using your life experience as data to support a claim. You don’t use your experience primarily to support a claim about yourself, however. That would be what Habermas and Bluck (2000) call an “autobiographical argument.” For example, in an autobiographical argument, someone might say, “I won a track meet in high school, which shows I am an athletic person.” In autobiographical *political* argument, you use your experience to make a claim about society.

What separates this form of argument from the broader category of testimonials is the autobiography. A testimonial is any direct citation of an experience as evidence—imagine the aforementioned caveman saying, “rub these two sticks together—it worked for me!” Autobiographical political argument, by contrast, focuses on a person’s critical influences, experiences, and identity. In testimonials, the experience is the evidence. In an autobiographical political argument, *you* are the evidence.

You are often insufficient evidence. In autobiographical political argument, you use yourself as an example—as a case capable of representing other similar cases. Exemplification implies the existence of other examples, and often typicality (Zillmann, 1999). But like much anecdotal evidence, autobiography is often atypical. It is, of course, highly individualized. It’s also run through the subjective emotional wringer of self-understanding. In many instances of autobiographical political argument, it is easy to imagine someone other than the storyteller making a competing claim by drawing on a comparable set of completely plausible circumstances. For instance, someone might reply to Benedikt’s argument about public school by saying he went to a sub-par public school as well, and was damaged by it—therefore, people should send their children to private school if given the chance.

Put another way, Toulmin (1952/2003) writes that a “warrant” is a shared assumption between speaker and audience that connects data to a claim. Despite autobiographical political argument being a popular, and perhaps powerful, form of argument, the warrant that connects the data of an individual life to a social phenomenon is a bit of a mystery.

To explore this matter, it’s worthwhile to look at the literature on autobiography and on first-person storytelling more generally. The autobiography, as mentioned above, is a psychologically significant concept. The life story that is kept in one’s mind, explaining oneself to oneself, is called our “narrative identity” (McAdams, 2008). We use it to create a sense of meaning in our lives by running a connective string through our salient experiences, giving them coherence. A narrative identity is not completely true—it can’t be—but it is still a key mechanism for understanding who we are and how we got here.

In constructing our narrative identity, we use something called “autobiographical reasoning,” a term coined by Habermas and Bluck (2000), which refers to “the activity of creating relations between

different parts of one's past, present, and future life, and one's personality and development" (Habermas, 2011, p. 1)—essentially, of treating one's life experiences as the source of one's personal identity. This might mean concluding that an experience *caused* a facet of our personality, or that an experience *illustrates* something fundamental about us.

The process of autobiographical reasoning, and the construction of the larger life story it feeds, is executed by the individual. But it is formed and informed by culture. Hammack (2008) argues that in building our own stories, we look to "master narratives" or "cultural scripts." We don't simply subscribe to them; rather, we dialogue with them, choosing certain aspects and rejecting others until we develop a sense of individuality derived from and oriented to the social. In a similar vein, McAdams and Pals (2006) call culture a "menu" of narrative options made available to the individual. "This menu includes expected developmental milestones for the life course, socially acceptable plots, and particular themes that are recurrent within the culture" (Adler & McAdams, 2007, p. 98).

Much of the work on narrative identity conceives of it as an internal phenomenon. Some narrative researchers, however, also consider the power of personal stories as "socially situated" efforts at identity construction (Thorne, 2004). Ibarra and Barbulescu have studied individuals telling "personal stories" to meet "identity aims," a process they call "narrative identity work" (2010, p. 137). Other research has shown that people tell narratives that suit their communicative goals with a particular audience (Pasupathi, 2001; Tversky & Marsh, 2000). Your narrative identity is profoundly important to you, as is having a given audience understand it according to your preferred interpretation.

This gives us one possible explanation for the appeal of autobiographical political argument *to the storyteller*: It's an opportunity to discuss social issues while doing narrative identity work. It's possible at least some part of the reason Benedikt relayed her anecdote about attending public school, for instance, was that sharing this aspect of her history with her readers met an identity aim for her. But this does not explain how autobiographical political argument works rhetorically, or its role in discourse.

We can gain a bit of insight into these issues by looking more closely at the "narrative" aspect of narrative identity. Narratives are generally understood as "accounts of events, which involve some temporal and/or causal coherence" (László, 2008, p. 2). The reason we use narratives to formulate our identity is that they are well suited to understanding important aspects of human conduct, such as motives (Bruner, 1986). They also make useful persuasive tools. Weber and Wirth observe, "the processing of narrative messages is different in nature from that of purely expository, argument-based messages . . . persuasive effects are conceptualized as direct or indirect results of the experiential states associated with narrative processing" (2014, p. 126). A receiver can be "transported into" a narrative, "absorbed by" one, or "engaged in" it (p. 126), all of which help the receiver accept the premises and lessons of the narrative. Receivers might also experience "identification" with story characters, seeing the world through their eyes and thereby adopting their beliefs and attitudes (de Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012). Indeed, exemplification researchers have found that impressions formed from vivid individual cases can overpower those formed from broader, more abstract information, even when an individual case is presented as atypical (Zillmann, 1999). Stories are powerful.

This power was on Fisher's mind when he proposed the "narrative paradigm" (1984). For many years, Fisher argues, Western thinkers subscribed to a "rational world paradigm," which held that "humans are essentially rational beings" (p. 4) who primarily make decisions and communicate through argument, governed by expertise and logic. In actuality, Fisher says, "humans are essentially storytellers" (p. 7). We make decisions and communicate based on the coherence and recognizability of narratives: "good reasons are the stuff of stories" (p. 8). There is still a place for traditional rationality in this paradigm, but it tends to be relegated to specialized fields, and is "subsumed" by narrative rationality, which is the overarching mode of communication and understanding.

Fisher's conceptualization of the narrative paradigm is a bit broader than I wish to consider here. But in this 1984 essay, he focuses on its application to the case of what he calls "public moral argument," a moral argument intended to persuade the public. He argues that narrative rationality helps explain how the public can be reasonable in such situations without the knowledge or authority of experts. Fisher focuses mostly on the public's *assessment* of arguments, saying narrative rationality guides it. But he certainly conceives of narrative rationality broadly enough for individual citizens to use it in *joining* public debate.

### A Rhetorical Question

One of the key questions we need to ask to understand any argument is what *means of persuasion* it uses. This is an old question. Aristotle addressed it, identifying three types of rhetorical "proofs" speakers can use to persuade: *logos* (logic), *ethos* (credibility), and *pathos* (emotion).

Before discussing the specifics of these, it's worth observing that there are other ways to think about persuasive appeals. But Aristotle's proofs are simple, clean, and classic, and have held up remarkably well. Research from social psychology has substantiated Aristotle's analysis to an impressive degree, finding that key elements in persuasion include the content of a message, the source of the message, and the receiver and context of the message, which overlap very nicely with *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* (Demirdogen, 2010).

*Logos* refers to a persuasive appeal to logic or reason, and is often characterized by the inclusion of facts, evidence, and/or empirical proofs (Gottweis, 2006). In a 2012 content analysis, Higgins and Walker coded for the presence of *logos* in persuasive appeals by searching for characteristics such as data, evidence/examples, and justifications. As a means of persuasion, *logos* is the use of appropriate, relevant facts and other forms of empirical evidence to lead logically to the speaker's or author's preferred conclusion. In short, *logos* amounts to "the facts as I have presented them require that you agree with me."

*Ethos* refers to the character of the speaker, and is characterized by the invocation of trust, respect, honesty, authority, etc. (Gottweis, 2006). Higgins and Walker coded for *ethos* by searching for characteristics such as deference, ingratiation, apparent expertise, and an inclination to succeed. *Ethos* amounts to "because *I* ought to be believed."

*Pathos* refers to the “passions” of the audience, such as empathy, sympathy, fear, or happiness. Higgins and Walker coded pathos in appeals to identification, especially through references to phenomena such as under-privilege, health, friendship, and hope. Pathos amounts to “listen to your heart.”

Logos, ethos, and pathos do not need to be mutually exclusive characteristics of a given argument. But researchers have repeatedly conceptualized arguments as emphasizing one or at most two of the forms. “We can differentiate between different models of argumentative performativity, or models of argumentative orientation (Caron, 1983, p.140) depending on their emphasis on pathos, ethos or logos” writes Gottweis in a chapter in which he argues that policy analysts have erroneously focused on logos as a form of appeal (2006, p. 245). He draws distinctions between etho-centric, logo-centric, and patho-centric arguments. Similarly, Higgins and Walker find different proofs emphasized in different arguments. And English, Sweetser and Ancu (2011) intentionally identify persuasive arguments dominated by one of these three means, in order to test them against one another (ethos does best).

This conceptualization has merit. Many arguments do emphasize one form of persuasion more than others, such as examples used by English et al. of one health care video citing statistics (logos), one featuring C. Everett Koop (ethos), and one featuring a humorous song (pathos). What form(s) do autobiographical political arguments use?

### **American Lives**

Another key question to ask to understand autobiographical political argument is how this form of persuasion connects to the life story as a psychological phenomenon. Do we draw on the same narrative themes and structures in these arguments that we use in narrative identity? If so, is that just because we tell stories this way? Or might it mean, as I argue here, that we are drawing on the psychological power and cultural cachet of life stories to bolster our arguments?

Redemption is one theme identified in narrative identity research that connects naturally to the debate between the 99 percent and the 53 percent. In open-ended interviews and experiments with Americans about their own life stories, McAdams has found that a particular subset of Americans—those in midlife who score high on tests of “generativity”—“see their lives as redemptive stories” (2006, p. 11). Generativity refers to “the adult’s concern for and commitment to promoting the welfare and development of future generations” (2006, p. 4). A redemptive story is one where good follows bad, and the protagonist receives “deliverance from suffering” (p. 7). So a generative midlife American adult would be likely to tell the kind of story in which she suffers, but then grows—for example, that she struggled in a difficult job, but in the end emerged with greater insight about how to endure.

The flip side of a redemptive story is a contamination story, in which a good, positive situation is spoiled—for example, an exciting new job turns out to be a mistake. All adults tell stories with contamination sequences, but generative adults tell them much less often than their less generative counterparts. People who tell these stories often are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (2006).

The redemptive life stories Americans tell, McAdams argues, reflect the fact that redemption is a key theme in American culture, present in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, slave narratives, Horatio Alger stories, self-help books, Oprah, and feel-good features in *People* magazine.

Americans have sought to narrate their lives as redemptive tales of atonement, emancipation, recovery, self-fulfillment, and upward social mobility. The stories speak of heroic individual protagonists – the *chosen people* – whose *manifest destiny* is to make a positive difference in a dangerous world, even when the world does not wish to be redeemed. The stories translate a deep and abiding script of American exceptionalism into the many contemporary narratives of success, recovery, development, liberation, and self-actualization that so pervade American talk, talk shows, therapy sessions, sermons, and commencement speeches. (2008, p. 256)

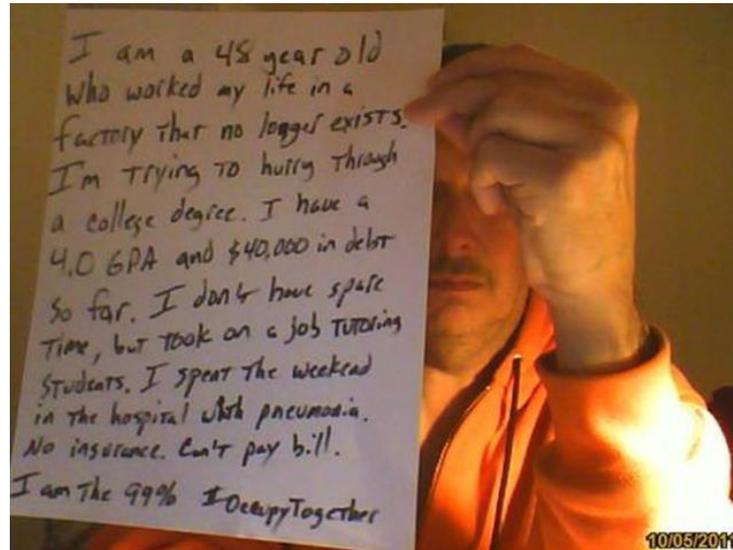
The American inequality debate is, at some level, about what kind of life is now available in America. It is possible that, in telling their own stories to debate this point, Americans simply answer this question in material terms. But it is also possible that they attack or defend the American social system based on whether it allows individuals to overcome adversity and achieve success—in other words, that they assess American life based on the availability of redemption, and conjure the power of life story themes.

### **The 99 Percent and the 53 Percent**

After it went viral, one of the activists behind the *We are the 99 Percent* blog, identifying himself only as "Chris," explained his vision for the project in an interview with *Mother Jones* magazine: "Get a bunch of people to submit their pictures with a hand-written sign explaining how these harsh financial times have been affecting them, have them identify themselves as the '99 percent,' and then write 'occupywallst.org' at the end" (Weinstein, 2011, para. 3). The aim was to highlight the economic struggles of the non-rich. The blog went live on September 8, 2011, and very quickly became a sensation, spreading through social media and getting cited in activist and mainstream media alike.

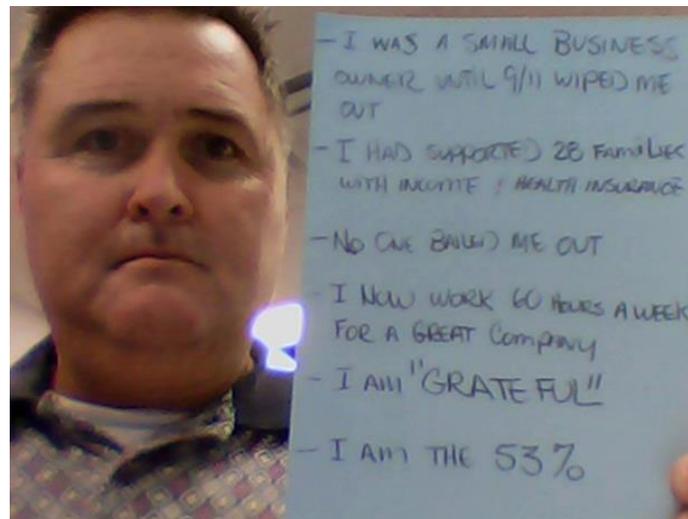
The guidelines for contribution, outlined on the site, were minimal. Anyone could submit a picture with a sign describing his or her situation—people were asked to use a marker and "be concise." Moderation was limited as well. The curators report posting "almost all" of the more than 100 entries they received each day, leaving off those that were illegible (Weinstein, 2011).

Most of the entries posted remained basically faithful to the original vision. The stories varied in length from a couple of lines to a whole page, but never longer; occasionally, someone would stray from the autobiographical and just offer a political statement, but not often. Initially Chris intended for posters to reveal their entire faces in their photos, but many preferred to remain anonymous, and so held up their signs to obscure themselves. Here is a typical entry (see Figure 1):



**Figure 1. A typical entry from "We are the 99 Percent." (October 2011)**

The blog was so popular that its enemies imitated it. According to the *Washington Post*, *We are the 53 Percent* was the idea of conservative activist and pundit Erick Erickson. The title makes reference to the fact that 53% of Americans pay federal income taxes (a fact later made famous as a talking point, accidentally, by Mitt Romney). The summary of the blog, posted in its left column, is straightforward: "Those of us who pay for those of you who whine about all of that. . . or that. . . or whatever." The directions for submission read only: "You can submit photos, and we'll approve them as soon as we can." Here's a typical entry (See Figure 2):



**Figure 2. A typical entry from "We are the 53 Percent." (October 2011)**

The *53 Percent* blog also received many submissions, and some media attention, though it never achieved anywhere near the cultural cachet of its predecessor.

Asked by *Mother Jones* why she thought the *99 Percent* blog caught on the way it did, blog co-founder Priscilla Grim said, "Because we all have a story, and the conversation about social safety nets has been lessened to that of accounting and not of the day-to-day realities" (Weinstein, 2011, para. 25). In response to the same question, Chris emphasized the sense of connection the blog enabled, suggesting that readers want

to know that they're not the only ones scared for the future, that they're not the only ones who do everything they're supposed to do and still fall down, that they're not the only ones who are starting to wonder whether their individual suffering is indicative of a much deeper, much more fundamental sickness in our society. (para. 27)

Others such as Schram have argued that the strength of the blog came from "collectivizing individual grievances":

Here, we see starkly in serial fashion the iterative imbrication of the relationship of personal narratives to impersonal numbers, where individuals talk of the different ways they have been personally made more precarious in the current era, even as they join to together [*sic*] under [the] impersonal statistic of the "We are the 99 percent." (2013, para. 9)

The blog, in other words, made statistics personal, and made the personal aggregate. Both blogs did this. But they also made arguments.

### **Method**

To explore how exactly these arguments worked, I analyzed posts from the *99 Percent* and *53 Percent* blogs for the presence of logos, ethos, and pathos—and separately, for the presence of redemption and contamination themes.

For my sample, I used 40 posts each (80 total) from the *99 Percent* and *53 Percent* blogs, starting from the earliest available posts. I selected pages at regular intervals (five-page intervals for the *99 Percent* blog; one-page intervals for the *53 Percent* blog, because there are fewer total posts on the latter), and took the top post from each selected page (the posts are chronological, so taking the top post did not bias the sample). On a few occasions, I skipped the top post and went to the next post down the page, because the top post was illegible, not from an American, or simply a statement of political conviction, and thus not an autobiographical political argument.

My analytical method was qualitative narrative analysis, focused on patterns in the emergence and use of the rhetorical devices and life story themes in each individual post. Specifically, I searched for logos by identifying appeals to facts, evidence, or logic in support of the post's claim. For example, if a

poster were to write, "I make \$1,200 a month and my health insurance costs \$800," to back a claim about the American economy, that would constitute logos.

I searched for ethos by identifying appeals to the speaker's credibility, such as expertise or the inclination to succeed or do the right thing, or attempts to ingratiate the speaker to the audience, such as self-criticism. For example, if a poster were to write, "I'm a veteran and I work hard to support my family," to make a case that he's qualified to express an opinion about the American economy, it would constitute ethos.

Finally, I searched for pathos by identifying appeals to emotions such as sympathy or pride, through references to sickness, children, realized hopes, etc. For example, if a poster were to write about growing up poor and then sending her first kid off to college, that would constitute pathos.

My examination of redemption and contamination sequences follows McAdams' (Foley Center for the Study of Lives, 1998, 1999), though slightly adapted, because McAdams' protocols are designed for a quantitative analysis of specific scenes within a narrated life story, rather than a qualitative reading of a summary blog post. A redemption sequence is marked first by the presence of a "demonstrably negative" state or event, such as fear, sadness, poverty, sickness, being fired, getting divorced, etc. This is followed by a "demonstrably positive" state or event, such as joy, satisfaction, love, victory, etc.

The positive sensation does not need to be more positive than the negative sensation is negative: "A very dark cloud can still leave a faint silver lining" (1999, para. 7). Nor does the negative sensation need to *cause* the positive sensation, though it may. The protagonist simply needs to move from a negative state to a positive one in the chronology of the story he or she tells about his or her life. For example, a story about suffering through an illness and then moving into a period of growth and strength is redemptive.

The key characteristic of a contamination scene is that "things get worse" (1998, para. 4). A situation need not be especially "good" at the start—it may be "barely acceptable." But it must deteriorate. For example, if a storyteller talks about taking a new job and then focuses on missing his previous employment his story is contaminated.

### **Logos, Ethos, and Pathos in the 99 Percent and 53 Percent Blogs**

It became clear very quickly, once I began searching for logos, ethos, and pathos, that all three elements are consistently and powerfully present in these two blogs. To understand how, I take each rhetorical proof in turn.

### Logos

Logos refers to facts, evidence or logic brought in support of an argument's claim. The "claim" of *99 Percent* posts is often implicit, but clear: that the economics of American life are cruel and unfair.

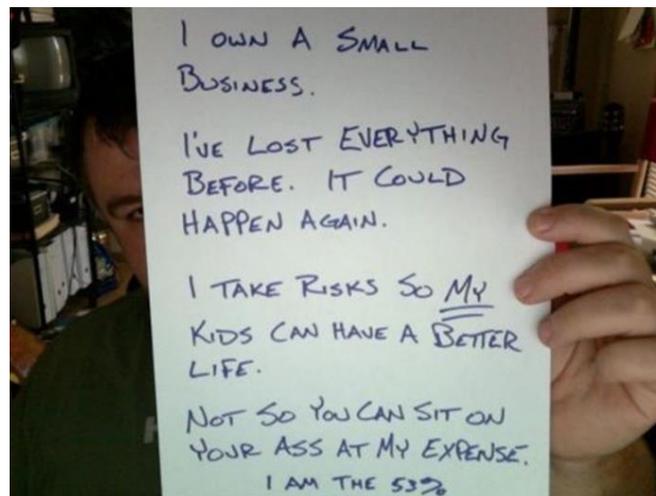
In most cases, appeals to logos by posters on the *99 Percent* blog are explicit and obvious. Many cite how much money they make in an hour, month, or year. Others disclose how much debt they hold or how many hours they work per week. One poster cites the unemployment rate in his or her town; another gives the details of his mortgage struggles. One writes "\$830/month SSI is only 11% of poverty line" (September 2011). Essentially, these posters argue, the math of American life doesn't work.

The central claim of the *53 Percent* posts is that those who work hard and take care of themselves can get by in America. Here, too, appeals to logos are often explicit. Several posters discuss how many hours they work per week. Some cite student loans or mortgages, and how they're paying them off. Others explain how they got their businesses off the ground. One poster writes,

I started my first business with \$60 and a really bad idea. It failed. I started my second business with \$300 and an even worse idea. It failed too. I started my third business with \$10,000 and a great idea. That one failed as well. (October 2011)

Several mention their effective tax rates.

In a small number of posts on these blogs, the use of data to support a claim is less explicit. But to say that these posts *lack* appeals to logos feels incoherent. Consider, for example, this entry (See Figure 3):



**Figure 3. This post includes no specific details, but still uses evidence to back a claim. (October 2011)**

This example includes no numbers, no policy details. But it is still using evidence to empirically back a claim. The evidence, in this case, is the story itself: this poster is offering himself as proof of the personal responsibility “the 53%” assume. And while it may not be *sufficient* evidence—it’s just one story—the appeal is clearly there.

Although it would be possible to parse out specific portions of certain posts that use evidence explicitly, every one of these posts actually makes a strong appeal to logos: The very premise of these writers’ arguments is that their lives are evidence of how the American economic system works. Logos is part of the architecture here; it’s very difficult to imagine a post that does not make central use of it.

### ***Ethos***

Appeals to ethos on the two blogs, like appeals to logos, are often explicit. On the *99 Percent* site, the most common strategy for establishing credibility is to explain that you are someone who has done the right thing, i.e., you’ve made the sorts of decisions that are supposed to lead to success in America, such as going to college or working two jobs. One poster notes his 4.0 GPA, another says she graduated summa cum laude, others report that they live modestly. The implication is that they’ve earned the right to criticize the system. Several more take an “ingratiation” approach to credibility by describing themselves as “lucky” even while recounting their own difficult circumstances.

Among the *53 Percent* posters, ethos is often established by explaining that they’ve seen hard times, whether by growing up poor, working full-time in undesirable jobs from a young age, or losing everything in business. “I am 22 years old and I come from an extremely low-income, single parent home who’s [*sic*] only source of income was child-support” (October 2011), one poster writes. The implication is that he’s earned the right to criticize those who don’t succeed. Other methods of establishing credibility in this sample include citing military service or working as a New York City EMT who “was there when it all went down 10 years ago” (October 2011).

A few posts make a softer appeal to ethos, like the one from a *53 Percent* poster who writes, “I admit it, I didn’t have to work in High School” (October 2011). But even here, ethos is part of the appeal: we’re meant to like this speaker and trust him. In fact, as with logos, it’s very difficult to imagine a post on these blogs that *doesn’t* use ethos. Every entry carries an implication of expertise simply by virtue of the fact that the poster makes his own life experience the issue. “I’ve lived this American economy,” these posts imply, “therefore I am a credible source.” Again, it would be possible here to specify where and in which posts explicit appeals to ethos are made. But to do so would obscure the fact that ethos is built into the architecture of all of them.

### ***Pathos***

The stories on the *99 Percent* site are brimming with pathos. Often, the pathos takes the form of appeals to sympathy, through the mention of subjects like children or illness. “We don’t have a phone to call 911 in case my 8-month old stops breathing” (September 2011), one poster writes. Another poster’s

husband “has a torn spinal disc” and “lives in constant pain” (October 2011). One spent a weekend in the hospital with pneumonia; another misses her daughter while working full-time.

The *53 Percent* posters appeal to pathos as well. Like the *99 Percent* posters, some use sympathy—one writes about having a “mother addicted to meth” (October 2011), one about his divorces, one about being upside-down on his house, another about losing his business. But several of these posts also evoke pathos by appealing to pride, making statements like “I have done it myself,” or “I have never taken a social handout.”

Is it possible to imagine, in theory, a robotic post that says, “I make \$24,000 a year. My expenses exceed this amount. I am the 99%”? Perhaps. But the fact that these posts take the form of narratives means that emotion is generally built into them. It’s the pathos, remember, that the founders of *We are the 99 Percent* point to as the source of the site’s appeal, and that separates it from other efforts to shed light on inequality. These stories are powerful because they traffic in emotion.

The simultaneous use of logos, ethos, and pathos in these autobiographical political arguments does not make them distinct from the more general category of autobiographical arguments, which also appeal to logos (my experience is evidence of my identity), ethos (I am an expert on my identity), and pathos (life stories are filled with emotion). It does, however, distinguish them from more traditional forms of public argument, debate, and deliberation as commonly understood, which are in theory more dependent on logos, privilege experts in terms of ethos, and downplay the value of pathos. Autobiographical political argument is also a particularly efficient and (arguably) effective way to use all three rhetorical proofs at once. In comparison, statistical data and expert testimonies lack pathos. First-person arguments that are not relevant personal stories do not necessarily appeal to logos. Even emotional third person examples relevant to a public concern (such as a story about a person poisoned by pollution) don’t evoke ethos or pathos to the same extent as first-person stories.

### **Redemption and Contamination in the *99 Percent* and *53 Percent* Blogs**

In searching for the presence of the themes of redemption or contamination in the posts I examined, I began by looking for the presence of a negative state. These were not hard to find in either the *99 Percent* or *53 Percent* blogs. Ninety-nine Percent posts, of course, describe myriad challenges and afflictions: unemployment, debt, sickness, injury, bankruptcy, wage cuts, long hours and long commutes, missed pay days, hunger, and fear all make appearances. Perhaps more surprisingly, the *53 Percent* posts actually cover much of the same ground. Posters describe losing businesses, growing up poor, getting divorced, getting laid off, suffering declines in wages and the value of their homes, working for poor pay, and getting sick. There are also experiences the posters treat as negative in the sense that they emphasize their difficulty, such as working multiple jobs.

One major difference between the two blogs, however, is that for *53 Percent* posters, the negative experiences are often in the past. Many of these posters have moved on to run successful businesses, buy homes, and pay down debt. One man whose business went under writes, “I now work 60 hours a week for a great company. I am ‘GRATEFUL’” (October 2011). Even the few cases in which the

material circumstances of posters hadn't improved by the time of writing nevertheless usually struck a positive note after describing the negative state: "Business is bad in this economy," writes one. "I now make about 30% of what I made 4 years ago. I just keep working hard every day, pay my taxes, and now live 100% debt free" (October 2011). This is redemptive language that is common in the *53 Percent* posts but rarely found in *99 Percent* posts: Out of the 40 *53 Percent* stories, 27 contain a sequence of events that can reasonably be described as "redemptive," while only four of the 40 *99 Percent* stories begin negatively and become positive—and two of those redemption sequences involve the writer leaving the U.S.

A second difference in the blog posts is the presence of "contamination" sequences. In 18 out of 40 *99 Percent* posts I examined, the author describes a positive state preceding a negative one, such as when one poster describes being on Medicaid and getting kicked off. Such "good to bad" sequences only occurred in two of the *53 Percent* stories. Without making too much of these specific numbers, it is clear that redemption themes are very common in *53 Percent* stories, and much less so in *99 Percent* stories, while contamination themes and/or the inability to escape difficult circumstances despite making an effort are more common themes in *99 Percent* stories. The themes are used to link one's personal narrative to larger narratives about economic inequality as a public issue.

This does not mean, necessarily, that the posters *actually* see their lives in this way, and certainly not *only* in this way. Recall that people tell stories with specific goals in mind for particular audiences. Clearly the contributors to these blogs knew they were using their life stories to make a persuasive political argument, and likely constructed their stories accordingly. But this is evidence that autobiographical political argument is a distinct rhetorical device.

Nor does it mean that the redemption/contamination dynamic fully explains the arguments made on the *99 Percent* and *53 Percent* blogs. There are other themes at work here, including merit, justice, and perseverance. But the presence and differential use of redemption/contamination helps make clear that life story themes are in play, and at issue, in autobiographical political argument. In this case, posters on the two blogs use their stories to connect the inequality debate to the high-stakes question of whether redemption is available in America today.

### **Conclusion: How Autobiographical Political Argument Works**

When Fisher writes that narrative rationality subsumes traditional rationality, he means, I believe, that story is a common, overarching form of rationality—of which the logos-based approaches of experts and political sophisticates are only one part. Autobiographical political argument is a specific form of narrative rationality, in which personal life narratives are used to communicate about issues of public import. In the examples in this study, the "subsuming" is even more direct than Fisher describes: traditional rationality—what I equate, roughly, to logos—becomes part of the narrative argument. Logos is built into the stories on the *99* and *53 Percent* blogs, because the central premise of these blogs is to cite one's life as evidence in an argument. Ethos, similarly, is subsumed into these autobiographical political arguments. Ethos draws on the speaker's identity for its appeal, and an autobiographical argument always articulates something about the speaker's identity. Pathos is a common feature of stories, and so a natural

occurrence in these appeals as well. One of the ways autobiographical stories can work as an argument, then, is by efficiently drawing on all three of Aristotle's rhetorical proofs at once.

These autobiographical political arguments also echo Fisher's description of narrative rationality by using as "good reasons" themes that ring true to the audience— the life story themes of narrative identity. We're all familiar with these themes. We learn them from culture, and use them to understand ourselves. The contributors to the *99 Percent* and *53 Percent* blogs conjured the common narrative identity themes of redemption and contamination to make larger points about social, economic, and political inequality. This raised the emotional stakes of the debate for American audiences, who understand implicitly the importance of redemption and its availability in American lives.

The three rhetorical proofs and the life story themes serve as warrants for the claims of autobiographical argument, drawing on the shared assumptions of audiences about what makes for an acceptable argument. In particular, appeals to logos ("I am evidence of a social phenomenon") and the use of common life story themes help connect the individual data to the social claim.

Whether these patterns hold true in other instances of autobiographical political argument remains an open question. It is possible that the *99* and *53 Percent* blogs offer a particularly strong appeal to the combination of logos, ethos, and pathos as well as to the theme of redemption and contamination because they argue not only "I am evidence," but also "I am one of many." This matter can only be settled through additional research, though I suspect that most autobiographical political arguments will demonstrate similar dynamics. Similarly, whether the specific qualities of autobiographical political arguments make them particularly *persuasive* is an important research question that is beyond the scope of this article. And nothing here speaks definitively to whether or not the use of autobiographical political argument is a normatively and pragmatically *appropriate* way to decide public issues. From these findings, we can see potential downsides, such as the elevation of individual experience to logos-like proof of social phenomena. But there are upsides as well: life story themes are important to people, and autobiographical political argument can help bring them into social discourse. What seems clear, in any case, is that this rhetorical move is a tool laypeople can use to be active participants in public debates, bringing evidence, expertise, emotion, and important cultural beliefs to bear as they weigh in on the state and direction of society—and doing so in ways that go beyond assessing the arguments of elites and experts.

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