**Learning from “Creation Narratives”**

Damon J. Phillips

I love to ask artists about the story behind the objects they create – what I refer to as creation narratives. The narratives affect my understanding of the art’s meaning, value, and even novelty. I’m particularly fascinated by the fact that creation narratives, even when highly idiosyncratic to the artist, can advance art. Indeed, in some cases it seems as if idiosyncratic narratives are associated with the biggest advancements.

The focus of my presentation is to consider whether social scientists might be able to share their own motivations and methodologies as creation narratives by learning from how members of artistic communities generate and share their own creation narratives. As a social scientist I also have creation narratives associated with my research – the dynamic stories about my motivations, methodologies, and revelations – but I rarely share them in the way that artists (or their representatives) can do when talking about their work. Instead, I am more likely to follow a more narrow (“scientific”) script of how to present theoretical motivations, sources of data, and methodologies. Unfortunately, our professional norms surrounding our creation scripts are sufficiently strong that adherence to the script can override a “true” creation narrative.¹ To the extent that social science is characterized by a disconnect between creation narratives that follow a scientific script and “true” creation narratives, our efforts degrade rather than advance our collective efforts.

In my fifteen minutes I plan to introduce the possibility that the articulation of creation narratives can positively affect the trajectory of social science research. My approach will be to first note the often-underappreciated power of creation narratives. My example will be research with Alia Crum and Tory Higgins on how creation narratives in the proper social context can alter our very physiology (the narrative changes our physical bodies), which then influences our understanding the created object. Second, I will draw on work with Sonia Coman on Benny Goodman’s attempts to provide a creation narrative for swing music in the 1930s, and how his narrative influenced not only the understanding of swing but also the overall trajectory of jazz. Finally, I will discuss an initiative I co-founded at Columbia, the Initiative for the Study and Practice of Organized Creativity and Culture (http://ispocc.columbia.edu/). Consistent with the Workshop on Creativity, Art, and Social Science, our mission is to bring together academics who study culture and creativity with New York City-based practitioners in art. We invite individuals from creative fields (haute cuisine, music, publish and the visual arts, etc.) to discuss topics such as their practices of artistic creation and classification.

I am honored to participate in this workshop. My hope is that my focus on creation narratives complements the perspectives of the others.

¹ Even ethnographers— who use narratives in describing their data collection more than other branches of sociology – are constrained lest their work be viewed as lacking objectivity.