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SHARED INFLUENCE: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING NARRATIVE THERAPY

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Poststructuralism presents an understanding of knowledge that inhibits any final reading of experience, and compels a change in understanding from knowledge to "knowledges," requiring a reformulation of the teaching and learning processes accordingly. Premises that constitute narrative therapy acknowledge that power is unequally distributed among various knowledges. In this article, we describe an approach to teaching narrative therapy that takes power relations into account. Attention is given to cultural discourses as they manifest power in the teaching and learning process and within certain domains of psychology. The importance of personal agency for students and teachers is also discussed. Additionally, there is consideration of the impact of dialogue and definitional ceremony. Three classroom exercises are described that illustrate and embody these ideas.

Poststructuralism posits that knowledge and meaning are unstable and culture bound. Rather than organizing around universal truth claims regarding human experience, poststructuralism recognizes the contingent nature of any single description. As Burr (2003) noted, in a poststructural view of language, "meaning is always contestable" (p. 54). Moreover, in the presence of a diverse field of knowledges, we accept along with Foucault (1975/1977) that certain knowledge practices are privileged over others. We therefore embrace teaching practices that take power relations into account.

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In the following, we describe an approach to teaching narrative therapy that addresses the shift required by poststructuralism and the differences in power between discourses and between teacher and student. Our discussion includes descriptions of deconstruction, our interest in personal agency for teacher and student, maintenance of traditional teaching practices such as lecture, practices of transparency, depictions of dialogic process and definitional ceremony, and description of three classroom exercises used in teaching narrative therapy. This work is informed chiefly through the discourses of narrative therapy, poststructuralist thought, and the work of Michel Foucault. We begin our discussion with consideration of the initial invitation to students to enter into understandings of narrative therapy that we expect will be largely new and potentially destabilizing.

RITES OF PASSAGE

It becomes necessary at the outset to orient students to the context of poststructuralism and to the likelihood that ideas taught in this course will differ profoundly from their expectations. We draw from poststructuralism in an effort to denote a view of the subject (in this instance, the student) as both a central figure capable of achieving a position of personal agency and, as Belsey (2002) noted in her depiction of the work of Louis Althusser, as "the destination of all ideology, and the place where it is reproduced. This is the source of its power: ideology is internal; we are its effects" (p. 39). As instructors we aim in teaching narrative therapy not merely to present a different model, but also to invite reflexive consideration of the status quo, its internal positioning, and its facility in engaging us in the reproduction of practices that are embedded in accepted language and metaphor. This places responsibility on the teacher's shoulders to convey what can be a destabilizing point of view in a way that engages students.

In his classic work, van Gennep (1960) provided an analysis and classification of a variety of rites of passage in various cultures. Epston and White (1992) identified van Gennep's rite of passage metaphor as a useful description of therapy. White (2004) utilized Turner's portrayal of the rite of passage metaphor to describe a process of separation from the known, followed by an intervening "liminal" phase, (cf. van Gennep (1960) *preliminal, liminal,* and *postliminal rites*, p. 21), and concluding with a reincorporation phase where "one begins to derive a sense that one is arriving at another place in life" (p. 52). This concept is appealing as a way to understand the process of inviting students to separate from expectations that would limit their interest to representations of conventional wisdom. Because knowledge is no longer regarded as a commodity possessed by an expert and transmitted linearly to individual students (Anderson, 1997), we favor an understanding where students are seen as persons making their way into a new discourse; the instructor resides already in this discourse, and from this locality invites students to navigate a territory that is novel to them.

Teaching deconstruction involves a critique (Ransom, 1997) of favored ideas and practices that have achieved truth status and impacted conceptions of the self. Foucault (1975/1977) identified psychology's preference for "knowledge that had already been accomplished" and its attraction to "a pedagogy that functions as a science" (p. 187). A concern over these practices leads us to expose assumptions of catalogued knowledge and thus deconstruct what knowledge must sound like. In this process we invite students to engage in a particular exploration, a "genealogy" (Foucault, 1975/1977) of these knowledge sets, to upset their status as established truths. In describing a genealogical approach, Ransom (1997) noted that "Foucault refers to the historical investigation of the origins and rationality of specific power formations" (p. 78). This begins a departure for students from preordained knowing.

To ask students to set aside the stability of the familiar in favor of the partial and contingent relationship to truth that poststructuralism recommends may not appeal unless it is an interest they hold. Discovering this interest requires a deliberate effort. Because of the potential for destabilization of students' assumptions, we choose a particular launching point in the first class: a discovery of student "intentional states" (White, 2001, p. 12) that might afford them access to a greater variety of preferences in their participation as learners.

In anticipation of their separation from taken-for-granted ways of knowing, students are guided through an interview process in search of intentions that would support such a journey. The rite of passage metaphor provides a context for making meaning of a destabilizing experience during the time it takes to transition from separation from established ways of knowing to a position of reincorporation that may include new and re-membered (Madigan & Grieves, 1997; Myerhoff as cited in White, 1997) practices. In this interview students are asked a series of questions intended as an opportunity to re-member themselves in additional ways, engage in a telling of these re-membered ways, find histories and communities connected to these accounts, and consider their implications for the student as learner. Re-membering practices referred to here indicate two purposes. The first involves connecting to enriched accounts of one's own sense of identity, presently and in regard to the past. The second involves relationships to persons past and present that make up the memberships of our lives. The following "Rediscovery of Position" interview is intended to establish a context for student authorship and the experience of sanctioning the semester-long journey.

Exercise 1: Rediscovery of Position

First, students are each asked to name aloud a closely held value or commitment (e.g., curiosity, skepticism, determination) that shapes how they position themselves as learners. Their answers are written on the board for all to see. This is followed by a series of questions. With each question students are given time for consideration and expression: *Can you name this value or commitment in a word or short phrase? Who knows this about you? What have they seen in your actions?*

Are there fellow students here who know you hold this value? How do they know? This process begins to construct and situate a story of community and history relating to the named value. Conducting this exercise with the entire class affords each student to be communally known.

Students are then asked to think back to the first expression of this value. This is followed by commentary and questioning: *It might have been before you were aware of it. Look back through today's eyes for the first indication of this value. How old were you? How old were you when you came to know this about yourself?* In personal reflection students often describe a gap in time between the first appearance of the value or commitment and their awareness of it. *What difference would it have made to you if you had known this about yourself from the time of its first appearance? What ideas, biases, or culturally dominant preconceptions might have stood between you and your knowing about this value or commitment sooner? In what way(s) does this value shape your participation in this program?* Classroom discussion of values or commitments provides an opportunity to publicly establish, and step further into, intentional positions.

DECONSTRUCTION

There are particular concerns we hold as narrative therapists. Chief among these is the idea that power is distributed unequally among cultural discourses. Dominant cultural discourses take up residence in persons, providing cover and unearned privilege for those who reflect their values and purposes, while producing a tyrannized interior life for others. This can lead to a social experience of being "right" in the world, or, conversely, to a more oppressed and marginalized existence.

Deconstructing unseen discourse serves to render privilege and its oppressive consequences visible. As White (1992) elaborated:

> deconstruction has to do with procedures that subvert taken-for-granted realities and practices; those so-called "truths" that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production, those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices, and those familiar practices of self and of relationship that are subjugating of persons' lives. (p. 121)

As narrative therapists, we fervently believe that it is important to take a stance in therapy and in the classroom that exposes privileged discourses and their effects. In addition, we hold the relationship between power and knowledge to be inseparable. Following White (1995), we accept that certain discourses have been elevated and accorded exclusionary power. Among these we would include patriarchy, white privilege, classism, consumerism, ableism, and heterosexism. For example, hooks (1995), in her analysis of black experience within the dominant culture, described how "Systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, and racism actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of black-

ness, to be self-hating" (p. 32). Privileged knowledges have real effects; they become "what everybody knows" (Gergen, 1994, p. 158). Such privileged knowledges are established as norms, desired objects, goals, or the fixed conditions by which we are measured and induced to measure ourselves and others. This defines an equation of power/knowledge: as a particular knowledge is afforded power, power so instated serves to maintain the privileged status of that particular knowledge. The internalization of dominant discourses left unattended results in the replication of their hold on persons and relationships. In this regard we join with Foucault (1980) in his call for "an insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (p. 81), which includes "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task . . . located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (p. 82).

A focus in our teaching involves the deconstruction of these taken-for-granted truths. The practice of externalizing the problem (White & Epston, 1990) is a deconstructive process (White, 1992). White (White & Epston, 1990) described that problems are typically languaged in a way that gives them internal location. He developed externalizing language practices whereby problems are objectified and personified so that persons can "separate themselves and their relationships from the problem" (p. 39). This practice fits with a poststructuralist view of the subject, who is not a repository for problems because there are no detectable internal structures or resting places for problems (Sarup, 1993). Through externalizing conversations, problems that were ascribed to persons as part of who they are become something other; problems are now languaged as external entities, separate from persons. This separation can provide perspective from which to see problems as supported by certain biases and specific histories and sustained through particular alliances. As a counterpart to such descriptions, the second exercise presented here offers students the opportunity to engage in forming questions that deconstruct rather than duplicate finite, structuralist conceptualizations of persons and problems.

Exercise 2: Who Am I and What Makes Me Thrive? Interviewing the Problem

In this exercise the instructor enters the classroom as a personified problem (White & Epston, 1990), such as Anger, the Code of Manhood, or Anorexia. It is the students' task to find out the problem's name. The discovery of the problem's name requires that students seek out and investigate the problem's supports, strongholds, and embedded nature in the larger cultural matrix, as well as its preoccupation with or disdain for certain targeted demographics (e.g., specific age categories, gender or sexual identity positions, racial location, and class position as viewed through a dominant cultural lens). Each student is asked to think of one or two questions as we move around the room. As the problem's name is discovered, students continue to generate questions.

The personified problem (as portrayed by the teacher) can guide the process by

expressing pleasure or displeasure with given questions. This helps to illustrate that some questions, namely those embedded in and derived from dominant culture (e.g., *How do people get you (Anger) out of their systems?* or *Do you mask people's deeper feelings?*), can make the problem stronger and assist in replicating assumed understandings. The personified problem might respond playfully, in the spirit of the exercise with the following: *I like these questions, thank you. They make me feel more secure. They internalize your sense of me.* Other kinds of questions (e.g., *Can you (Anger) distance people from their preferred values or actions? How do you do this?* or *Do you make certain promises?*) expose the problem as separate and invested in particular aims, making it harder to operate undetected. The problem might have more of a nervous, though still playful, reaction in this instance: *I'm not enjoying this conversation anymore. I'm feeling overly exposed*. Rather than being a hard sell, this game tends to be fun and provides students with an experience of being influential in a community forum.

PERSONAL AGENCY

In his discussion on personal agency, White (2001) indicated: "it casts people as active mediators, negotiators, and as representatives of their own lives" (p. 8). Considering personal agency necessitates an examination of modern forms of power and how various discourses organize thought and action in accordance with the larger cultural matrix. Investigations that engage in deconstruction of imposed norms, alongside inquiry into preferred actions, are important steps in the redistribution of power between students and normative requirements for living and learning. This redistribution can serve to enhance opportunities for thought and action that would involve an experience of personal agency.

Student Agency

Students arrive in class already acquainted with various models of psychology. These models in many instances embody normative cultural assumptions established through the accepted modes of observation, measurement, and assessment that are in keeping with practices of modern power. In the students' induction into the profession along these lines, certainty is attained through unexamined association with these disciplinary practices.

Other purposes, often expressed in single or fleeting utterances, require notice. We can listen for moments of alternate expression, during which something is said that may be an allusion to an alternate value. This is one place where student and teacher may find common ground and shared purpose.

A student may express a partial thought indicating possible separation from a dominant discourse. This can be subsumed within a larger expression of adherence to the discourse. For example, a student may say: *I appreciate externalizing*

language, but it's not natural. By giving attention to this expressed appreciation, students can be assisted in becoming acquainted with a value they may hold but in a way that is still unfamiliar, even though they spoke the words. Instead, their imagination may be more predominantly inhabited by a structuralist view of problem description or location. Steadied by a poststructuralist ballast, the teacher is positioned to receive each fragment in the student's expression as potentially agentive—both *I appreciate externalizing language* and *but it's not natural.* Because the first part rests outside the bounds of taken-for-granted knowledge and enjoys no built-in support, it may benefit from investigation. The teacher may ask, *Alongside its seeming unnatural, what is it that you appreciate about externalizing language? What does it evoke for you? Would this practice provide you with any sense of opportunity for your own life and work?* These kinds of questions allow students to situate externalizing practices in their lived experience and to access a personal context from which to determine its value. It is hoped that in this context students will find themselves engaged by a sense of personal agency. The student is also free to hold on to more traditional ideas. While normative cultural assumptions are not being promoted in a course on narrative therapy, there is no intention to eliminate them. Rather, deconstruction is interested in repositioning the taken for granted, putting it back in time and place, reestablishing its context, and making visible the conditions by which it gained prominence.

Students frequently bring varied, and sometimes unarticulated, interests and intentions into the classroom. By noticing the multiplicity of student expressions, joined purpose can be found and student agency can gain greater footing over the course of a semester.

Teacher Agency

A poststructural perspective in no way limits our access as teachers to personal agency. Not holding a position of certainty regarding the commitments we carry into the classroom does not diminish the scope of our thesis or sense of purpose embodied in our teaching practices. We do not limit ourselves exclusively to listening for openings afforded us by the utterances of students, as described in the previous section. We are informed by an "ethical responsibility" (White, 2004, p. 48) to render visible discourses that impact and restrict opportunities for meaning making and alternative ways of constituting identity.

We are freed, in part, to pursue these commitments in our teaching, by deconstructing our own ideas; that is, locating ourselves alongside particular values, philosophies, and communities. We make clear that we are not interested in imposing "the new truth." Instead, we participate in a community embracing ideas that currently resonate for us as practitioners and teachers. We intend to give full voice to these concepts while hoping to reduce the risk of imposition. In the section that follows, we address this through descriptions of transparency and situating ideas as practiced by the instructor.

TRANSPARENCY AND SITUATING IDEAS

As teachers we hold particular commitments and values that shape our thinking. We claim a certain prerogative to these values, not because we see them as objectively more true than other possibilities, but because preference and bias are unavoidable. This is asserted openly. The idea that we can transcend bias in favor of stable, fixed truth is part of the structuralist agenda we have set aside. Our interest is not only to acknowledge our biases to students, but also to describe how they originated. Naming and acknowledging values and biases is one way in which we situate ourselves as teachers. The question is not how to do away with power differences between teacher and student—this is not possible. In the ubiquitous presence of power relations (Foucault, 1978), our intention is to openly address hierarchy and support student agency.

Narrative ideas—and all ideas—can be engaged with as living, breathing experience residing in histories and in current social, collegial, and discursive contexts. While we hold certain purposes as constants (e.g., the deconstruction of normalizing truths), we occupy relational space in a given moment that makes us contingent witnesses to our own lives, with shifting awarenesses. For example, in our ongoing dialogue between Los Angeles and Rapid City about this article and graduate courses we teach on narrative therapy, we have found ourselves drawn in by different elements of these ideas. Particular aspects of narrative work have lit up and come back to the center of our thinking. We have found renewed resonance in, among other things, practices of transparency. This has led us to a more reflexive awareness while we are engaged in various conversations. Heading from these experiences into the classroom has positioned us to speak in ways that feel fresh and alive. Because we have no final map of narrative therapy, we are only able to describe to students the current state of how this approach is speaking to us. Situating and transparency in the classroom comprise attempts to mitigate authority and domination. Engaging in this and similar practices recognizes that teaching exists in a larger community of ideas and is not objective or final.

A WORD ON PEDAGOGY

Even so, we maintain that the instructor has some-“thing” (see Tyler, 1987) to teach. That is, there remains a place for traditional lecturing and addressing questions that have relatively discreet answers. This would include such “things” as ideas, definitions, therapeutic practices, and philosophical commitments relevant to narrative therapy. We may, for example, lecture about the concept of unique outcomes (White & Epston, 1990). Borrowing the term from the work of Goffman (as cited in White & Epston, 1990), unique outcomes are seen in narrative therapy as a gateway to alternative grounds for one’s life and stand in contrast to dominant accounts that are likely to exist in unison with privileged cultural discourse.

When presented by the instructor in lecture form, such information can communicate ideas and definitions needed to understand the term in question and facilitate movement into a new community discourse. Establishing a substantial degree of definitional clarity is paramount. That is, it is important for the understanding attained by each student to correspond meaningfully, insofar as it is possible, to the consensus of understanding narrative practices. Without this we run the risk of terminology deteriorating into overly subjective understandings, thereby diluting its usefulness within a narrative community. As Belsey (2002) noted in her introduction to poststructuralism, "language is not in any sense personal or private" (p. 5) and "a purely private language does not permit dialogue, and so hardly qualifies as a *language* at all" (p. 18).

It is here that we believe the instructor holds some position of authority. This much seems unavoidable. We understand this aspect of our position as teachers as being socially constructed; that is, the institutions and technologies that support this location of the teacher as having power are created in and through the larger culture and have legitimacy neither intrinsically nor outside of that culture. As teachers we hold two intentions: first, to be vividly positioned, standing for something, and second, to maintain a concern for the students we engage, that their sense of agency is preserved and enhanced.

DIALOGUE

Inevitably students and teachers will engage in conversation in the classroom. We find that, in view of power differences, a dialogical approach to classroom conversation helps to create and sustain an experience of *shared influence* in which all speakers enjoy a sense of personal agency. Anderson (1997) argued for a preference of dialogue over monologue in therapy and described therapy as a generative process occurring through "dialogical conversation" (p. 109). Paré and Lysack (2004) argued that monological conversation can result in replication of problems residing in discourse. Dialogue, then, involves people in conversation, each carrying an openness to being moved by others' words. Applying this in the classroom setting, Anderson (1997) is to be credited for elaborating what she termed "dialogical learning communities" (p. 244) and describing that "a teacher's challenge is to give a student an opportunity to join in a shared inquiry into, and conclusion to, the issues at hand" (p. 246).

There are instances in class when dominant truths insinuate themselves into conversation. For example, a problem discourse that relies on medical metaphor and pathologizing language may arise and obscure other possible modes of speech. As teachers, we sense the moment and the amount of room available for critique. Some moments do not offer this kind of space. In these instances we acknowledge that other ideas have been favored and have held value for people, and we attempt, without debate, to move back in the direction of the planned course material.

Of course, the mood in the classroom is not left exclusively to the teacher's "private" senses. Often we are unsure how to proceed and find it best to consult the class. We may have mixed feelings and have found it helpful, rather than choosing one direction over another, to first speak to our dilemma and ask the students what would be most useful. We rely on them in these moments to tell us what they are feeling receptive to or ready for. We find that whether they ask to let the conversation continue as is or invite an expansion of the points made by additional lecture, they feel some authorship and agency in relation to the next steps taken. Alongside our commitment to resisting the duplication of disciplinary power stands an interest in maintaining a sense of partnership with students as we venture into the unfamiliar. Having the space as teachers to bring the dilemma and its competing impulses into conversation with students allows us to occupy space in the classroom more fully and in keeping with a dialogic process and our preferred values.

As narrative teachers we therefore hold: (a) dialogue provides for a sense of shared influence, (b) openness to students' ideas is critical, (c) we strive to be aware of and accountable for our privileged position, and (d) we keep visible our sense of responsibility to resist the duplication of taken-for-granted truths. Our commitment to this last intention has given the greatest shape to this article and holds our attention here.

DEFINITIONAL CEREMONY IN THE CLASSROOM

We have advocated for an account of identity that is achieved through engagement within community. In this regard we find particular applicability of what Meyerhoff (1978) termed *definitional ceremony*. Following the work of Myerhoff (as cited in White 1995, 1997; White & Epston, 1990), White further developed therapeutic practices of definitional ceremony. These practices are organized around persons seeking consultation. A person talks about his or her life as it is concerning him or her, and is listened to by people occupying witnessing positions. Witnesses, or "outsider witnesses" (White, 1997, 2005), are invited to speak to ways in which they are impacted by aspects of the person's expressed thoughts. This initiates a process of retellings and provides the opportunity for the person at the center of the therapeutic experience to see the impact and feel the reverberations of the person's words on those in witnessing positions.

These practices offer an experience of engagement, not just for the person at the center of the work, but for those bearing witness as well. This includes a reconceptualization of the therapist's position from one consigned to neutral observation to one that is itself open to movement and alteration. Such movement, or what White (2005) refers to as transport to a new place or understanding, can be the outcome of definitional ceremony for all involved.

In the context of the classroom, similar movement occurs in dialogic conversation. The ongoing process of being mutually witnessed in dialogue can approach

the same experience as definitional ceremony. Classroom exercises described in this article have attempted to serve in part as definitional ceremony as students have engaged in public performance of their values, commitments, and emerging skills. Our third and final exercise, called Internalized Other Letter Writing, borrows from the practice of internalized other interviewing developed by Epston (1993) and Tomm (1998) and practices of definitional ceremony. An experience of identity constituted through community work is invoked.

Exercise 3: Internalized Other Letter Writing

From a poststructuralist view, the formation and maintenance of identity are not seen as a private, internal, or cellular (Foucault, 1977) undertaking. Rather, identity is approached as a phenomenon negotiated and supported through language in relational contexts and community. With attention to these contexts, identities can be thickened or enriched (Geertz, 1973; White, 2000). The following exercise provides an opportunity to support rich identity conclusions through an experience of populating persons with those in their histories who have added to their lives and witnessed their actions at turning points.

Step 1: Inviting Students into a Reflective Position

The student is invited as follows: *Sit back and relax and close your eyes. Shift, in your thoughts, to your own history and think of the people who have known you best. Give some thought to who has influenced you and perhaps been influenced by you. Think of important moments or turning points in your life that the two of you have shared.*

Step 2: Feeling the Presence of Others in Our Lives

The student is then asked: *Of those who come to mind, whom do you carry with you in a way that feels most present? Can you bring them forward and feel them close at hand?*

Step 3: Writing Letters

To sit as witness while the internalized other writes creates the opportunity to experience identity as relational. *Please call them forward. I would like to speak to them*. Speaking now to the internalized others whom the students have brought forward, the instructor continues: *Now that you have been brought forward, I'd like to ask each of you to write a letter to the student who is here with you today. Each of you knows something important about the person who is here attending class. Think of what you want to express to them. It may be gratitude or acknowledgment. It may be a letter of regret. You may have noticed, in important moments,*

certain values or commitments this person stands with. These may be things you have already said or may not have found the opportunity to express. Take about a half-hour now to compose your letters.

Step 4: Reading the Letters

Students are invited to read aloud the letters that, through the hand of the internalized other, have been written to them. The reading amounts to a witnessed telling (White, 1997, 2000). This telling is an opportunity for the student to be more richly known in community.

Step 5: Retellings

The class, having heard the reading of a letter, is invited to reflect aloud on its impact. In their reflections, students are guided to participate as outsider witnesses (White, 1997, 2005). This involves speaking to the ways in which they were personally moved by what was read. This verbal exchange serves as a retelling (White, 1997, 2000) and a further populating and thickening of identity.

Step 6: Retelling of Retelling

Finally, the student is invited to reflect on the outsider witness reflections. This is an opportunity for the student to further occupy the center position and choose those comments that were most fitting, and in support of their aims and intentions.

CONCLUSION

Power relations are always present in language and among cultural discourses. Certain discourses attain favored status and become embedded in professional disciplines and the lives of persons. Deconstruction provides a method that brings unequal power distribution into question. In teaching narrative therapy we are inviting students to consider practices that challenge rather than duplicate dominant cultural discourses. Students then embark on a process that is potentially destabilizing of their expectations and existing conceptions of knowledge. As teachers of narrative therapy, we engage in practices that assist students in their navigation of this new territory, and do so in ways that account for differences in power. In this regard, we have argued for the enhancement of personal agency for student and teacher. Because teachers hold positions of authority and power, we believe that through situating practices and transparency we can make room for students to participate more fully in the negotiation of meaning in their learning experience. Reliance on definitional ceremony through dialogue and classroom exercises enhances possibility for movement of students' sense of identity as they make their way into the discourse of narrative therapy.

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STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)
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