

# NARRATIVE CONCEPTS AND ANALYSIS IN SPIRITUALLY- BASED COMMUNITIES

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*Researchers from a wide variety of disciplines have found narratives to be useful explaining cross-level psychological phenomena. Narratives with different sources and functions occur at group (dominant cultural and community narratives) and individual levels of analysis (stories). A variety of methods can be used to identify, record, and analyze narratives and stories. Research on narratives may be particularly useful for understanding the relationship between social process and individual experience, especially in spiritually based communities (e.g., religious organizations). Narratives in spiritual settings appear to serve a variety of functions in community life including fostering development of members' identity, defining community membership (i.e., gatekeeping), building a sense of community, and facilitating personal change. As such, local community narratives are vital psychological resources, particularly where dominant cultural narratives fail to adequately represent the lived experience of individuals. The documentation and analysis of narratives is, therefore, a worthy project for community psychologists. © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.*

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Recently, at a three-day symposium on narrative, I learned that it's unsafe to say anything much about narrative, because if a poststructuralist doesn't get to you a deconstructionist will. This is a pity, because the subject is an interesting one to those outside the armed camps of literary theory. As one who spends a good deal of her time telling stories, I should like to know, in the first place, why I tell stories, and in the second place, why you listen to them; and *visa versa*.

—Ursula K. LeGuin (1989, p. 37)

A wide range of social scientists find narrative structures and storytelling processes useful in explaining social and psychological phenomena that span levels of analysis, including those central to the field of community psychology. For example, several recent models suggest that human memory, learning, and social cognition take narrative form and arise in the context of interactive storytelling (Schank & Abelson, 1995; Wyer, 1994). Moving up a level, clinicians have conceptualized behavior change in terms of reworking or transforming one's personal story (Russel & Van den Broek, 1992). Others see the social exchange of narratives as a means of socialization (Miller & Moore, 1989) or identity development (McAdams, 1988, 1990). Some regard narrative as a root metaphor for psychological experience in general (Sarbin, 1986). Narratives have also been viewed as constituting the community (Bruner & Gofrain, 1984; Goldberg, 1982; Hauerwas, 1983) and as useful in spanning individual, group and community levels of analysis (Rappaport, 1993; Salzer, 1998).

### **NARRATIVES IN RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUALLY BASED COMMUNITIES**

In this article, we focus on the use of narratives for understanding the reciprocal relationships between spiritually based communities (e.g., religious organizations and 12-step self-help groups) and their members (Goldberg, 1982; ; Hauerwas, 1983; Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995; Rappaport & Simkins, 1991). There are several reasons why narratives are particularly suited for describing and analyzing such communities. First, narratives about spiritual life have shaped worldwide religious institutions, local religious congregations, and the personal lives of individual members. Second, community psychologists recognize the importance of spirituality and religion in the development, organization, and quality of community life (e.g., Kloos, Horneffer, & Moore, 1995; Maton & Wells, 1995; Newbrough, O'Gorman, & Docecki, 1998). Religious narratives are repeatedly told, internalized, and enacted giving them great power to shape individual and collective life (Rappaport & Simkins, 1991) and thus, may represent a resource, underutilized by community psychologists, for coping with adversity or increasing empowerment (Rappaport, 1995). Third, spiritually based communities are defined and guided by texts characterized by the narrative form of exposition (Hauerwas, 1983; Newbrough, O'Gorman, & Docecki, 1998). For example, Christian communities follow the teachings of The Bible, a book filled with narrative forms that define and guide members on how they should live their lives (e.g., parables). Furthermore, the discourse and practices of religious communities often take narrative form (e.g., confession, communion, and conversion). Fourth, both religious and spiritually based communities and narratives are defined in substantial part by an ideological framework (see McAdams, 1988). Therefore, narrative is an analytic unit commensurate with the phenomena of investigation in spiritually based communities.

Our research team has hypothesized that communities, particularly spiritually based communities, have narrative accounts, accessible to the members that guide how members understand themselves and their life stories (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995; Rappaport & Simkins, 1991). These accounts will usually describe events over time and involve main and secondary characters. They communicate to members and to others what the community is like, how it came to be that way, and (sometimes implicitly) what behavior is expected. We assume that all people understand (and are able to tell themselves and others about) their own life in a story form. Indeed, this may be the most natural way that people understand themselves and experience life (Carr, 1997).

### *Defining Narrative*

Although precise definitions of a narrative have been suggested and debated (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982; Labov, 1982; LeGuin, 1989; Sarbin, 1986; Schank & Abelson, 1995; Stein, 1982), and below we will suggest several different kinds of narratives based on their source and function, we begin with a commonsense understanding of narrative. In its simplest and most general sense, a narrative approach to the phenomena of community psychology means studying community life in terms of the stories people tell when they gather together. In this sense, many community psychologists are already familiar with narratives in the course of their collaborative research and action projects. Stories are powerful forms of communication to both others and oneself. They are told and retold in everyday conversation and especially in those social contexts with ceremonial or ritualistic meaning, such as in spiritually based communities. Stories organize experience, give coherence and meaning to life events, and provide a sense of continuity, history, and of the future.

More formally, a story is defined by its internal structure of communication. Stories are temporally and thematically organized descriptions of meaningful events in context. Other definitions of stories contain additional elements (e.g., characters, ideological background; see Labov, 1982 and McAdams, 1988), but most definitions include these two aspects. Temporal organization means that the story form of discourse is meaningful because of its sequencing of events (i.e., the beginning, middle, and ending of stories cannot be rearranged without a loss of meaning). Analyses of narratives should preserve this internal organization. Analyses that collapse the structure and rich detail of stories to lists or counts of independent content categories in the narrative (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Folkman, 1997) destroy their essential form and lose information about the social context from which they derive meaning.

The second defining characteristic of stories, thematic organization, refers to their evaluative aspect; that is, stories are about something that the storyteller cares about. Stories are told for a reason, for example, humorous stories release tension, life histories may create intimacy with the audience, and legends build group cohesion. Thus, not all event sequences take a storied form; they are about something meaningful in the lives of the teller and audience. In our experience, listening to people closely during interviews, they often become more emotionally involved or talk about their experience in more rich, detailed language when they are launching into a story. Storytelling may produce more vivid memories than do responses to scale items. This difference in the quality and style of discourse is one way of marking the beginning and end of a narrative unit within the context of an ongoing conversation or interview response.

As a concrete illustration of a story, consider the following example about a member of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) trying to attend a group meeting:

Visiting a strange city, a newly sober A.A. member sets out to find an A.A. meeting. Following directions received on the telephone, he walks into a hall that is part of a large church-complex and begins to search for the room where the meeting is being held. The first door he opens reveals a group of children in choir robes, getting ready to sing. He closes the door rather quickly . . . no, that's not it. He looks in another door . . . no, half a dozen women are sewing and talking. That's not it.

Approaching panic, for he has never felt comfortable in a church, he walks quickly down the hallway, feeling a little lost, thinking that if he sees an exit he will take it, but still hoping to find what he came for. Suddenly, a cloud of cigarette smoke wafts down the hallway, and he smells the bitter, burnt aroma of strong coffee. He hears voices, and the welcoming sound of people laughing. Walking faster, he finds a room with the familiar blue-jacketed books on the table and the oh-so-trite but now-so-welcome framed mottoes on the wall. Entering the room, greeted by a dozen smiles, he sighs deeply and smiles back. He's just found *home*. (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992, pp. 233–234; italics in original).

The passage has all the features of a story including an ordered and integrated beginning, middle, and ending; a rich and thick description of the events and sensory experiences; and, a theme about the importance of “being at home” in a spiritual community. This theme has been found to characterize the narratives of other spiritually based communities as well (see Mankowski & Thomas, this issue) and is viewed by Kurtz and Ketcham as a central aspect of spiritual experience.

Our research group hypothesizes that parallel versions of stories exist at the individual, community, and cultural levels of analysis (see also Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995; Rappaport, 1993; Salzer, 1998). Because of this, we have found it helpful to use different terms to describe narratives occurring at these different levels. From this point forward, we will use the term *story* to refer to individual people and their personal accounts of their own life experiences, and *narrative* for a communal or shared story about events that are commonly known or experienced by members of the group.

We also distinguish between two types of narratives. First, at the most general level of analysis are *dominant cultural narratives* (see Howard, 1991; Salzer, 1998). These narratives are repeatedly told in the major socializing institutions of a culture (e.g., mass media, schools, churches) and affect the general values, beliefs, and identities of most people living in that time and place. For example, a prototypic dominant cultural narrative in the United States, stemming from the emphasis on individuality, emphasizes self-reliance and self-help. Americans often tell stories whose theme or point is “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” to illustrate how admirable characters cope with repeated adversity in their lives.

In many cases, powerful people in a culture maintain dominant cultural narratives about marginalized groups. The people who they are about may internalize and believe these narratives that show up in their own stories. Such stories may be either positive or negative and may have both positive and negative implications for the person's identity. For example, dominant cultural narratives about public-housing residents are couched in pathological, yet sympathetic terms and may produce a narrow range of defending narratives among residents (Salzer, 1998).

A second type of narrative exists at the level of a particular setting. Individuals may tell stories about their personal experience that parallels similar stories told by other group members. Together, these stories constitute a *community narrative* representing their collective experience and knowledge. Often, a community narrative is about the group itself. For example, community narratives in the form of written or oral accounts, art, and artistic performance (e.g., Rappaport, 1998; Thomas & Rappaport, 1996) or other symbolic activity (e.g., ceremony) are communicated about events that are commonly experienced by the members and central to their sense of collective or social identity. These narratives may be about the history of the community, explaining how it began, evolved and became what it is today, as well as narratives about important events and themes in the lives of typical and important members of the group. For example, as indicated by its frequent appearance in community psychology textbooks, an important and well-known community narrative among community psychologists locates the origins of the field at The Education of Psychologists for Community Mental Health Conference held in 1965 at Swampscott, Massachusetts (Bennett et al., 1966).

### *Recording and Documenting Narratives*

The articles in this special section are based on this narrative approach to the cross-level study of individuals within spiritual communities. Consequently, the most difficult conceptual problem for narrative studies of cross-level phenomena is how to distinguish the community narrative from the individual story without losing the fact that these are inseparable in context. Consistent with the ecological theory guiding community psychology (Trickett, Kelly, & Vincent, 1985), we are neither exclusively describing individuals nor groups, but rather, processes that require us to see people and their community context as a transactional unit (Altman & Rogoff, 1987).

Methods useful for collecting narrative data within this theoretical perspective tend to be consistent with the values and approaches advocated by community psychologists such as collaboration, and diverse methods at multiple levels of analysis. Within each of the studies reported in this special section, the researchers drew upon and integrated a variety of these established methods to record and analyze the content, function, and structure of community narratives and individual stories. For example, descriptive (including participant) observation, focus groups, and semi-structured individual interviews were used in the student campus ministry (Mankowski & Thomas, this issue). Work with the Catholic sisters' community (Stuber, this issue) and the Alcoholics Anonymous members (Humphreys, this issue) also centered on direct and/or participant observation, individual interviews, and extended contact over time with the community. In each of these studies there was a conscious effort to know the setting "before the beginning" of the study (Sarason, 1972). Interviews with individual community members were also used to elicit stories in each of these studies; but the interviews ranged from formal and structured to unstructured interviews and seemingly casual conversations recorded as field notes. In addition, some of the researchers took the step of conducting a member check (Chesler, 1991) "after the end" of the formal research in which their analyses were subject to final scrutiny by the community members themselves for accuracy and completeness. While the methods that we drew upon have proven to be useful given our hypotheses about the interplay of community narratives and individual stories, other methods are also likely to be useful to investigate additional hypotheses about narratives in different studies. In other words, we do not argue that these are the only ways to investigate narrative.

Soliciting stories from community members has certain advantages over other, more “researcher driven” forms of data collection, such as personality inventories or attitude and belief questionnaires. Stories cannot as easily be fabricated or modified to demand characteristics, especially when they are recorded in the context of an ongoing, trusting relationship as developed by participant observers, or even by engaging interviewers. Storytelling also gives the participants an active role in constructing and communicating their own viewpoints. This permits a view that more validly represents participants’ experience and gives us insight into the subjective meanings on which their behaviors are based (see Mishler, 1986).

Community and cultural narratives, by definition, reside collectively in the interactions and minds of community members. But researchers are not limited to techniques that directly elicit narratives from individual community members; in addition, observing or participating in a community will expose the person to narratives that occur naturally. In some cases where collective identity and cohesion are high, the narratives are well developed and communicated very explicitly, consciously and purposefully (e.g., churches, self-help groups). In these settings, communication of community narratives is a part of the group’s purpose and is relatively easy to document. In other cases, the narratives may be less developed or their communication less explicit or conscious (e.g., athletic teams, members of a neighborhood block association) and therefore, more difficult to document and analyze.

Researchers, working in collaboration with group members can develop a representation of the community narrative by aggregating common aspects of different sources of qualitative data (e.g., stories told by members, observations of group practices, artistic creations or performances, texts written or commonly read by members). In this process, the researcher can function as a consultant to the community, helping to draw out the narrative for the research as well as other purposes that the community may have for developing a more explicit account of itself (e.g., to use in recruiting new members; to document their history, and increase collective identity). For example, we have conducted research with self-help groups for men (Mankowski, in press) and for people with serious problems in living (Rappaport et al., 1985) that intentionally used storytelling in their groups to increase cohesion and sense of community.

Given that researchers may need to construct community narratives by selecting key portions of text from multiple informants, we have often been asked, “How do you know what a community’s narrative is?” The social constructionist epistemology on which most narrative theories about psychological phenomena are based suggests that a large part of knowing involves the ability to reproduce the content and form of discourse through which people interact. Qualitative methods enable researchers to develop this kind of knowing (see Banyard & Miller, 1998; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). For example, some community psychologists, recognize this point and have worked with professional “documenters” who record the daily events and social interactions involved in doing their collaborative research (see Scheinfeld, 1992). These constructed stories are not any less meaningful in that they can influence the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of others. In fact, the ability to construct a story in a language and form that is meaningful to others in a community may indicate that the author deeply understands the community. For example, composite stories that researchers write based on listening to the stories of others are sometimes used to capture the essence of several, more lengthy individual stories (e.g., Kennedy, 1995; Salzer, 1998).

### *Analyzing and Interpreting Narratives*

A major challenge for narrative research with communities is demarcating the phenomena and analyzing the functions of community texts, traditions, and activities that constitute the narrative. For example, where does a story begin and end? What if the story is different depending on the interpersonal context or historical time in which it is communicated?

Narrative analysis attempts to compare and contrast texts (interviews, documents, performances) based on their substantive content, internal structure, and psychological functions. In the complex flow of social interaction that community researchers encounter during their observations, narrative units or types are best thought of heuristically rather than as precise forms that appear with clean boundaries in all settings. However, one goal of the research is to define more specific features of narratives for any *particular* study. The researcher can then describe how specific features (e.g., structure, thematic content) of narratives are related across levels. For example, Humphreys' (this issue) divides stories heard in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings into five types (drunk-a-log, serial story, apologue, legends, and humorous) that represent somewhat distinct configurations of content, structure, and function within the community. Mankowski & Thomas (this issue) draw distinctions between four narratives in a campus ministry community based solely on their thematic content (the acceptance and diversity of members, creating home away from home, growth through questioning, and healing past hurt). Stuber (this issue) develops an analysis of a Roman Catholic religious order based on its historical narrative, and the biblical, family, and humorous stories told by the individual sisters. Other types or forms of narratives and stories (e.g., expressed in the stained glass windows of churches) are likely to be found in different communities (Rappaport, 2000).

The choice of narrative as the unit of analysis is a beginning step in narrative analysis; a second step is deciding upon the framework for analysis. An analytic system that is comparable across the individual members' stories and the group's community narratives can help understanding of the psychological processes and substantive similarities that integrate these levels of analysis. We regard such similarity as evidence supporting our general hypothesis that the narratives of a community influence the life stories of its members and *visa versa*. Audio or visual recordings of the community, or its texts, or real-time coding of the community's social interactions, rituals, and performances may be analyzed to explain the similarity between members' stories and the community's narrative. Such data may indicate how narratives create uniformity between members' stories about themselves on the one hand, and the community's narrative about itself on the other.

*Content analysis.* There are few agreed-upon systems within the field of psychology for analyzing textual material (e.g., see Folkman, 1997). A variety of techniques have been tried, ranging from rule-based coding systems of small semantic units (e.g., Mandler, 1984; Stein, 1982), or larger categories of meaning (e.g., Baumiester, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990), to substantive content analysis (Smith, 1992), to more interpretive approaches (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that the researcher may believe can be validated by the community members themselves (see Chesler, 1991). McAdams (1988) has developed a detailed and fairly reliable system of coding the internal features (characters, ideological setting, nuclear episodes), structures (complexity), and thematic contents (power and intimacy) of personal life stories. This system might be usefully applied to community narratives as well. However, each analytic system is best developed within the theory or approach used by the researcher to interpret the

phenomenon. For example, taking an empowerment approach to the study of self-help groups suggests a different analytic system than does a clinical or treatment-based conceptualization (Rappaport, 1993).

Our approach and the one used in the articles that follow, emphasizes thematic content analysis and interpretive approaches to analyzing the content and meaning of narrative (Denzin, 1989; Rizzo & Corsaro, 1995). In these approaches, the importance of a theme is not determined by the frequency of representative keywords or phrases (which would require breaking down the internal features of a story and coding or counting the parts), but by the emotional significance of the material or its centrality to meaning or identity. In such systems, distinctive or unusual, rather than frequent content may be most informative.

*Structural analysis.* Humphreys' (this issue) discussion of how Alcoholics Anonymous members' drunk-a-log stories follow a structure similar to Christianity's account of arrogance, fall, and redemption is an example of structural analysis and the important community processes it can highlight. However, we have yet to discover a widely applicable system for analyzing the internal features comprising the structure of a story. Work done in other fields may be useful and we should draw upon it. For example, Murray's (1989) analysis of personal identity and physical distance among marathon runners and travelers utilizes a well-known taxonomy of narrative structures (romance, comedy, irony, tragedy) from the field of literary analysis (see also Gergen & Gergen, 1988). These four types of story structure differ according to the pattern of emotional valence over time. For example, tragedy begins as a positively valenced story but ends negatively while comedy-romance narratives begin positively, then become more negative, but end on a positive note.

Another example is the framework of Labov (1982), a linguist, who has suggested that narrative structure is defined by a set of sequential features. All narratives begin with an orientation (or one is implicit) in which characters and a setting are described, followed by an abstract or summary of the point of the story, a complicating action in which there is some causal disturbance in the original set of conditions described or assumed to exist in the orientation, followed by an evaluation, in which the storyteller comments on or evaluates the meaning of this change or set of conditions, and finally, a conclusion or resolution of the story which brings teller and listener back to the present time. This structural framework has been applied to the analysis of personal and community narratives, for example, those representing the experiences of people affected by HIV (Viney & Bousfield, 1991).

In our experience, however, to obtain stories that can be coded using this kind of feature-based system requires that the eliciting conditions of the stories be more specific and controlled than is usually possible or desirable in doing collaborative community psychology. In other words, in the course of conversations between familiar community members, narratives are not always communicated fully in their ideal form. It may be that researchers need to construct these higher-order features from numerous, more contextually specific stories collected through observation or interviews with community members. Each story may contain some but not all of the features of a prototypic narrative as Labov (1982) defines it. Nonetheless, structural-analytic systems can be useful, particularly when used as conceptual frameworks for guiding more interpretive analyses of the kind discussed above.

*Functional analysis.* A major part of our conceptualization of narratives is that they function as psychological *resources*, available to community members to be used to understand

and interpret their experiences and guide the construction of their personal identity or life story. Many of the people we have spoken with made or are trying to make a shift in their personal story. Some have purposefully joined a community to find a new narrative or to reinforce one they had already adopted. Other people are struggling with a narrative they do not like; still others are constructing their own story in order to be a part of the community.

Narratives are also a resource for the community, as they help create collective identity, build cohesion, and recruit new members (as well as excluding others). The stories people do or do not tell about each other may help us to understand the community as well as the person and the relation or processes between them. They may tell us about the strength of the sense of community, the goals of the community, its structure, and functions.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS OF NARRATIVES IN SPIRITUALLY BASED COMMUNITIES**

Now we turn to highlight some of the psychological functions of narratives in spiritually based communities as suggested by the findings of three studies reported in this special section. Before beginning, we note that the three contexts are similar in their religious or spiritual focus, but different in other specific respects. They range from those in which there is a lifetime commitment to membership, through those in which the members see each other as in an important, but transitional setting. Some deal with problems in living, while others begin with a more positive sense of identity. They vary from “tight” to “loose” in their structure, rituals, and commitments to each other. Despite their differences, we find comparisons between them instructive. Here we highlight some of the most salient examples of psychological functions fulfilled by narratives to illustrate what can be learned about spiritually based communities through analyses of their narratives and individual members’ stories.

#### ***Narratives Define Group Membership and Collective Identity***

Mankowski and Thomas (this issue) illustrate how social institutions, in this case a religious foundation for students transitioning to a large college campus, provide narratives that support individual and collective identity during stressful transitions. Some years ago, George Fairweather (Fairweather, Sanders, Maynard, & Cressler, 1969) described chronic mental patients as “marginal men” because they did not have a niche in the social environment where their personal story matched the stories of others in a positive way, i.e., a way that offered both acceptance and a vision for the future. His now classic invention of lodge societies where such men could live and work and share a common vision remains among the most optimistic and important interventions for people with a history of serious problems in living. But these are not the only people who need a place to belong and a community narrative into which they can fit their own personal life story. All people need such settings. This need is particularly obvious during times of transition, and the movement of college students from home to campus is—for many—such a time.

Because religious settings usually have written texts that are widely read and formal rituals that are routinely practiced, we can more readily document their community nar-

ratives. In the study of the campus ministry (as well as Humphreys' study of Alcoholics Anonymous), the authors made use of these sources, along with leaders' deep knowledge of the setting. Historical as well as contemporary data helps to form our understanding.

The studies in this section also call attention to the powerful and often central role of religion in community life (Maton & Wells, 1995). It is not the specific theology or classic elements of religion that are of interest, but rather the ways in which religious communities assist people to find meaning in their lives, something that seems to be an essential ingredient of personal identity. The particular campus ministry studied is but one of the large number of such settings on college campuses in this country. They seem to provide an important socialization function, largely through the narratives they offer about what it means to be a member of their particular group (Greeley, 1994).

In addition to providing a sense of belonging during a disruptive life, these settings are, of necessity, exclusionary. Narratives mark collective identity by serving a "gate-keeping" function that enables the community to include and exclude those who do not fit its vision (for a recent interesting discussion of this problem in a religious context designed for gay and lesbian Christians, see Rodriguez & Ouellette, 1999). As Brewer (1991) has pointed out, social or collective identity is achieved in a delicate balance between distinctiveness and similarity to others. Although the overt themes of the campus ministry's narrative are welcoming (e.g., accepting differences, creating a place to feel at home, healing past hurt, and encouraging personal growth), the narrative is also used to exclude students whose values are different. This enables the ministry to build group cohesion and distinguish itself from other ministries on campus.

There is something both ironic and significant about the reality that community settings (and often religious ones) where there is a genuine sense of community are also exclusionary, whatever their abstract values. All communities by definition have boundaries, and as these boundaries take on meaning for the members they necessarily separate themselves from others. This remains a perplexing issue for community psychology. Cross-level narrative analysis may be a useful tool for understanding similar processes in other settings, such as the many and diverse ethnic minority groups whose narratives are fighting for both distinctiveness and a place within a multicultural society and world.

How can settings enable their members psychologically (in terms of identity) to be part of both an ethnic (or religious) community and of the larger society? Doing this may be easier if the narrative of the larger community can accommodate people who also have more specific communities of identity. The struggle of some Americans to view their society as multicultural as opposed to a "melting pot" is, in part, an effort to retain the community narratives that have sustained them personally and historically, without fear that gatekeepers will effectively exclude them from the larger society.

### *Narratives as Markers for Sense of Community*

In both the studies of the campus ministry and the convent, narratives are conceived as resources or "vessels" (Stuber, this issue) that preserve valuable information about how to live life, construct a meaningful identity, and belong to a community. However, in the Roman Catholic convent we see people at a very different time of life than those in the campus ministry, and indeed, these are people for whom the setting narrative has been adopted as the principal one in their lives. For the college students, the campus ministry competes or coexists with others in their life. For the sisters of the convent, there is no rival narrative. Their work, social and private family lives are largely seen within the con-

text of the community narrative. They each long ago gave up alternative narratives. Here is a tightly knit setting where the narrative about the community and stories about each other are deeply intertwined. Sense of community is very high.

Ever since Sarason (1974) introduced the idea to our field, there have been various efforts to measure the “psychological sense of community” (e.g., Newbrough & Chavis, 1986; Puddifoot, 1996). Although this is not the place to review such efforts, one persisting problem in the use of this concept is the tendency to confound sense of community, when it is assessed by self-report questionnaire, with other domains. For example, it is quite difficult to separate sense of community from general evaluation. High sense of community will most often be highly correlated with positive ratings on almost any variable—probably due, in part, to method error. However, it is quite possible, and important theoretically, that some settings will have both a high sense of community and a number of negative features. While some measures of sense of community have usefully redefined it in terms such as neighborhood cohesion (Buckner, 1988) this is not necessarily a measure applicable to other kinds of settings.

One contribution of Stuber’s study of the convent (this issue) is to suggest that an alternative way of assessing sense of community may be found in the analysis of community narratives. She suggests that the number of stories people in a setting tell about each other may be a useful index of the level of sense of community in a particular setting. If so, this way of measuring sense of community would have the advantages of not being confounded with questionnaire assessments of other variables and of being independent of the positive or negative valence of the stories. This type of assessment would add to the construct validity of this theoretically appealing but empirically problematic concept.

### *Narratives Provide Alternative Discourses for the Construction of Personal Identity*

Although the specific context for Humphreys’ study is Alcoholics Anonymous, the functions of the different types of stories he has identified appear to be applicable to many self-help groups and organizations (see also Rappaport, 1993), and probably to a much wider variety of voluntary settings as well. Mechanisms that support traditions, release tensions, engender awe, socialize newcomers, provide a sense of identity, and resolve past hurts (also seen in the campus ministry narrative) may be important functions in any organization’s ability to provide its members with a coherent and identity-sustaining worldview. The study illustrates how a well-developed community narrative provides an alternative way of constructing personal stories to those offered in settings shaped by dominant cultural narratives, and how individual members through group storytelling may slowly adopt the narrative. Simultaneously, over time, the alternative narrative itself is constructed and revised based on the personal stories of the members. In the most dramatic cases, the narrative contributes to individual change by serving as a resource that offers an alternative explanation for one’s alcoholic life history. It is out of this new story that the will to change or regulate behavior emerges.

The conceptualization of personal change as the adoption of an alternative story has also been viewed as a key component in cognitive–behavioral psychotherapy (Russell, & Van den Broek, 1992). However, as community psychologists are well aware, the cost, the format, and accessibility of psychotherapy often makes it either ineffective or inaccessible to a wide variety of people, including many of those most in need of assistance. How, why, and when such people are able to adopt new stories as their own may be one key

to understanding the motivational side of individual change processes. For people who have a worldview and set of life experiences that causes them to be or feel different from others, alternatives are needed to the dominant narrative told in professional mental health settings. In other words, individual change may be inseparable from the social and community context in which it occurs.

## CONCLUSIONS AND ACTION IMPLICATIONS

Taken together, we hope that the set of studies reported in this special section and the commentary on them illustrate how narratives can be documented and analyzed to better understand the transactional relationship between community processes and individual lives in spiritually based settings. In addition to the value of the findings or outcomes of the study, the process of doing narrative research can contribute to community empowerment and social change efforts.

By serving as recorders and amplifiers of the voices of people with limited access to power, we can help make their stories better known, first to themselves and then to others (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997). Collaboration with community members can assist them in telling and presenting their stories in accessible and meaningful forms such as articles in newspapers and journals, reports, public town meetings, events and demonstrations, and visual and performance art (Rappaport, 1998; Thomas & Rappaport, 1996). This work would serve to develop and expand local community narratives as vital psychological resources, particularly where dominant cultural narratives fail to adequately represent the lived experience of individuals. For example, such alternative narratives could contribute to the development of sense of community and well being among groups of people whose spiritual beliefs and practices cannot be easily incorporated within the Judeo-Christian narrative dominant in the United States.

Storytelling vitally contributes to the survival and development of spiritually based communities. If experiences are not narrated, they are more likely to be forgotten (Schank & Abelson, 1995) and therefore, unavailable as resources for instilling hope and inspiration, deepening tradition and a sense of history, or coping with and changing negative personal or social conditions. For psychologists who want to assist local communities and groups whose narratives are excluded from the dominant cultural narratives to maintain their own sense of identity, documenting and analyzing narratives serves both science and the communities. For example, the result of a community doing collaborative research on its narratives may be a written history or a collected body of stories of current and past members. These written documents, much like "The Big Book" has functioned within Alcoholics Anonymous (see Humphreys, this issue) may be used to organize a community, integrate or recruit new members, guide older members who have gone astray, or advocate for the community with nonmembers. Narrative studies can be utilized by spiritually based communities to inspire storytelling practices, to evaluate whether their storytelling contributes to the achievement of their goals, and to learn how to more consciously apply the tools of their experience in other settings.

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