

COMMUNITY NARRATIVES AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Community narratives are crucial in defining people's and groups' understandings of identity, memory, belonging and social reality. The article explored how the shared stories, traditions, collective memories, and digital means of storytelling helped to shape human experience socially. Scholarship from the sociology, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies and media studies was synthesized using a qualitative narrative review. The results indicated that the community narratives facilitated the maintenance of cultural continuity, fostered a sense of community identity and enabled members to make sense of personal and historical events. They also found that dominant discourses may be able to normalise social norms, to marginalise other experiences, and to shape what is remembered in public discourse. Counter-narratives and participatory storytelling gave alternative perspectives to groups who had previously been excluded, offering them a chance to reclaim their identity, challenge the stereotype and redefine the meaning of the community. The digital platforms enabled the extension of narrative participation beyond geographical boundaries, but also led to misinformation, polarization and distortions of reality. The article ends by stating that community narratives "served as a device of social cohesion and they were also a place of contestation. The recognition, empathy and social participation of others could be enhanced by increased focus on inclusive narratives, multilingual traditions, voices of the margins and ethical approaches to digital practice, which could foster more balanced representations of collective experience.

Keywords: Community Narratives, Social Construction, Collective Memory, Narrative Identity, Digital Storytelling

1. Introduction

No experience is made in isolation when it comes to humans. Humans make sense of themselves and the world by means of stories that are conveyed in the context of families, neighbourhoods, cultural communities, religious organizations, institutions and via digital platforms. These stories explain why things are and are not, right and wrong, good and bad, and how people succeed or fail and how they should act in a society. They also link personal experience to the larger history, enabling people to find a meaning in the events which is already in circulation in their community. Storytelling is thus not just an expressive activity but it can also be a means for groups to structure information, to deal with uncertainty, and to create a common understanding of new information. In this way, a set of community stories turns into a tool to collectively make sense of and coordinate social processes (Bietti et al., 2019).

The construction of identity also is not solely the product of the personal, but of socially available discourses. Adolescents and young people continuously change their perceptions of themselves as a result of family relations, peer group relationships, cultural norms and broader social changes. Identity development is a continuous process as individuals not only seek to find continuity in their identity development but they also seek to find change within it as well as they are responding to the identity roles given or denied to them by their communities. The processes demonstrate how personal identity is built through relationships and is continually re-constructed with the evolution of social contexts (Branje et al., 2021). Narrative identity offers a particularly fruitful perspective on this process because people integrate experiences, aims, relationships and junctures into a story that creates a temporal coherence (McAdams, 2018).

Community narratives also help to foster identity, through the promotion of culturally preferred models of an acceptable life.

Master narratives convey the prevailing expectations to achieve success, maintain an intact family, be a good citizen, being a good woman, being a good person, and resilience. People who align with these models might be recognized and accepted as a social group, while people whose experiences are not those might feel tensions, exclusion or pressure to conform their narratives. However, there are opportunities for alternative identity formation, and for critical reflection on culturally-dominant stories, when it is different (McLean et al., 2018). There are also cultural preferences evident in the elevated social value of stories that lend themselves to redemption from suffering to personal growth, especially in the U.S. culture (McLean et al., 2020). Narrative identity can then be explored from motivational, emotional and structural perspectives that highlight the way that people structure life experiences in the context of wider cultural contexts (McLean et al., 2020).

Memory is a crucial part of this narrative/socially constructed relationship. Collective memory isn't an exact snapshot of the past; rather it is developed by talking about it, repeating it, selecting it and reinterpreting it. Communities create joint-accounts by focusing on some events and with time, forgetting about, reducing or ignoring others (Hirst & Coman, 2018). Relying on psychological models, it can be seen that collective memory is created through the interplay of individual memory, socialization, public representation and group identity (Hirst et al., 2018). These processes can foster unity, but result in the production of prejudiced historical interpretations. The act of being overfamiliar with their nation's contributions to world history, for instance, is a way in which citizens' judgments and perceptions of their countries may be too group-centred (Zaromb et al., 2018).

Positive and traumatic stories have an impact on individual health, too. When individuals relate memories to their identity, relationships and beliefs about their past and future, memories gain meaning in memory. Making connections between self

and emotionally meaningful events may be helpful for coherence but they may also help to perpetuate distress if there is a lack of resolution with events from the past (Merrill et al., 2019). In these instances in particular, there is an added value in community recognition, to validate experiences that dominant narratives have not covered. Digital Storytelling has opened up the possibility to share lived experiences with combinations of voice, text, pictures and other media, making it possible to participate, reflect and share knowledge in health and community contexts (Rieger et al., 2018).

Collective narratives are also being preserved, circulated and contested in new ways with the advent of digital technologies. While online platforms offer communities the ability to capture their experiences quickly, they also raise some of the new challenges involving authenticity, visibility, the filtering that algorithms perform and memory control. Generative artificial intelligence can also help change how we remember, with the potential of creating interactive visualisations of historical events and events of mass suffering, which presents ethical challenges of distortion, authority and suffering at scale (Makhortykh et al., 2023). In the context of all this, the current paper explored the role of community stories in the social construction of human experience in terms of identity formation, collective memory, cultural continuity, power relations, social inclusion and digital storytelling. It was meant to explain how common narratives consolidate a sense of community and also provide the opportunity for reflecting and/or changing a community. The major objectives of the study are:

1. To examine how community narratives shape individual and collective identity.
2. To analyse the role of shared stories in constructing memory, belonging, and social meaning.
3. To assess how dominant, alternative, and digital narratives reinforce or transform community realities.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach, specifically with a narrative review of the literature, in order to gain an understanding of the role that community stories play in social construction of human experiences. The selected design was chosen as it would allow for the study to comprehend ideas, concepts and arguments from a range of academic texts. The main focus of the review was the subject of story, shared meaning, collective identity, memory and social interaction in the daily life. The study reviewed and explored the literature to the effect of community narratives on individual and collective realities, but did not attempt to measure variables statistically. The design also enabled interdisciplinary approach to the topic, based on the concepts of the sociology, anthropology, psychology, communication and cultural studies.

2.2 Literature Search and Source Selection

The literature search was structured, utilizing academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical papers, or institutional publications, for the purpose of identifying literature relevant to the study. Search was done around concepts such as community stories/stories of community, social construction, collective memory, identity, lived

experience, belonging and cultural meaning. Narratives were selected as sources when they clearly mentioned how narratives help to create individual or collective understanding. There was a particular focus on literature which was developed into a sociological context by the influential works from earlier in the century and further up-to-date research. To ensure the conceptual clarity and scholarly reliability of the review, materials that didn't have academic relevance, made unsupported claims, and had just a small connection with the central topic were omitted.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The literature review was limited to the English language and to work which examined the narrative in communities, and the importance of these narratives for the construction of identities, memories, values, relationships and understandings of experience. Theory was considered both in a classical form, and in the modern and relevant context. The sources from sociology, anthropology, psychology, media studies and cultural studies, which had direct relevance to the research focus, were included. If the focus of the publication was literary form, single story only, or there was insufficient conceptual analysis, then it was not included. Some of the arguments and sources that were weak from an academic perspective were duplicated, and thus removed during the selection process.

2.4 Data Analysis and Thematic Synthesis

The literature read was thoroughly digested and categorized into clusters of similar ideas, interpretations and theories. The key ideas were grouped together broadly and then condensed and summarised as themes: identity formation, collective memory, belonging, cultural continuity, power relations, marginalisation and digital storytelling. These comparisons then prompted a consideration of the points of agreement, disagreement, and advancement of ideas between the studies. An additional element of the analysis was the ways in which the narratives affirmed dominant social narratives and/or offered a forum for alternative voices and experiences. The outcomes of the literature search were summarized and brought together in a coherent discussion to make sense of the link between community storytelling and socially constructed realities, whilst still acknowledging that there are differences between contexts within communities or between social settings.

3. Results

3.1 Community Narratives and Identity Formation

A review of the literature revealed that the role of community narratives was integral to the construction of community and personal identities. People had frameworks to interpret their position in society and their personal experiences, these frameworks were in the form of shared stories, traditions, historical accounts and cultural symbols. Identity was not static but was shaped over time as a result of regular contact with families, neighbours, religious and ethnic communities and cultural groups. The results also showed that community stories tended to enhance a sense of belonging, as they helped to bond people together to a shared history and identity. But at times, personal expression was restricted in dominant narratives, when experiences of individuals were not in line with the accepted experience of the community

Table 1. Major Functions of Community Narratives in Identity Formation

Narrative function	Influence on human experience
Shared history	Connected individuals with collective origins
Cultural traditions	Reinforced values, customs, and expected behaviour

Community symbols	Strengthened social belonging and recognition
Family stories	Shaped personal memory and self-understanding
Alternative narratives	Enabled resistance to dominant identities

3.2 Collective Memory and Cultural Continuity

The results showed that the community stories would help to keep the collective memory alive and pass on knowledge, history and culture from one generation to the next. Communities kept continuity intact in the face of social change through oral history, commemorative events, rituals, and local histories. Such stories also helped to recall, interpret, and/or silence past events. Collective memory was seen to be important in uniting people and providing shared points of reference from which to grasp the sense of hardship, success, migration, conflict, and survival. Concurrently, the examined works indicated that memory was selective, for certain experiences were highlighted, while other voices were marginalised, usually in the main narratives of history.

Table 2. Narrative Forms and Their Role in Collective Memory

Narrative form	Role in cultural continuity
Oral history	Preserved community knowledge
Rituals and ceremonies	Reaffirmed shared values
Memorial practices	Maintained historical awareness
Folklore and legends	Transmitted moral and cultural meanings
Testimonies	Recorded overlooked or traumatic experiences

3.3 Narratives, Power, and Social Inclusion

The evidence that was reviewed indicated that the community stories told were a reflection of the unequal power relations in society. The ideas of the dominant groups tended to define what was accepted as history, morality, identity and social behaviour and those of women, minorities, migrants, and other voiceless groups were not equally acknowledged. Narratives were thus both a tool and a weapon of control, as well as a means of resistance. Alternative stories allowed communities to contest the stereotypes, assert their identity and share their experiences that were not represented in the mainstream narratives. The findings also indicated that inclusive stories facilitated recognition and empathy, while rigid and/or exclusionary stories strengthened discrimination, non-verbal communication, and social distance between various community groups.

Table 3. Narrative Power and Social Consequences

Narrative pattern	Likely social consequence
Dominant narrative	Reinforcement of accepted norms
Exclusionary narrative	Marginalisation and social distance
Counter-narrative	Resistance and identity reclamation
Inclusive narrative	Recognition and social participation
Silenced narrative	Loss of representation and memory

3.4 Digital Storytelling and Changing Human Experience

The results revealed digital platforms changed the processes of how community stories were created, circulated, and negotiated. The ability to tell stories across the globe of social media, online forums, virtual communities and digital archives is what made it possible for people to get involved in storytelling without having to cross a physical boundary. The spaces made personal experiences more visible and fostered the quick building of collective identities in relation to social issues, culture, trauma and belonging. Digital narratives were also affected by misinformation, selective representation, and the emotionally polarised content. Reviewed literature indicated that the online story making process provided opportunities for participation, but it also created a disintegration of collective understanding, with the emergence of a variety of different groups developing their own narratives of reality in digitally connected communities.

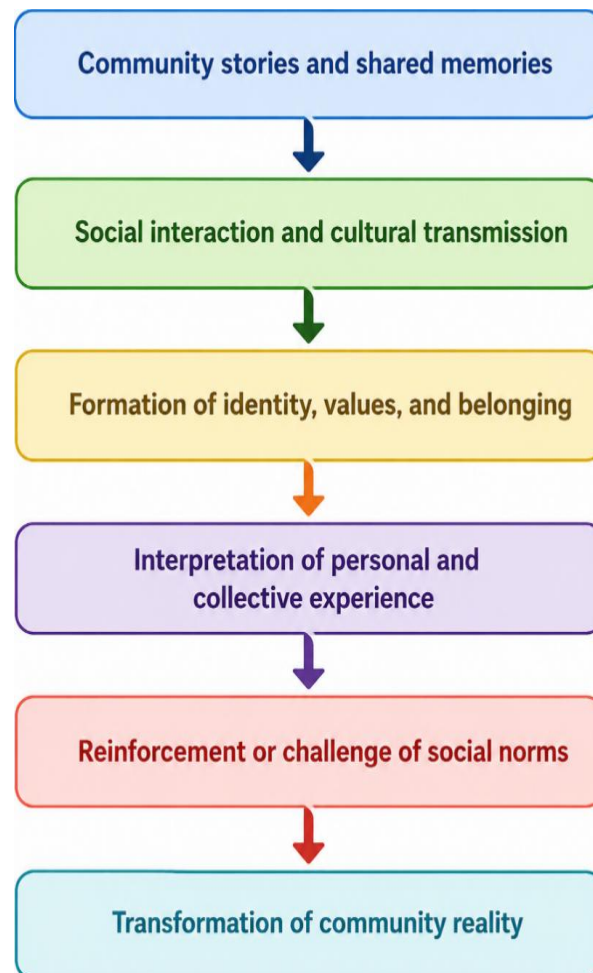


Figure 1. Process Through Which Community Narratives Shaped Human Experience

4. Discussion

Results showed that community stories were significant ways by which people engaged with meanings of identity, memory, belonging and social reality. Common narratives linked personal narratives to collective history and enabled individuals to situate themselves in their families, cultural communities, religious communities, and broader societal contexts. The results also demonstrated that identity was flexible as it was negotiated, told and changed in relation to social conditions. Collective memory maintained a continuity by passing on traditions, past experiences and community values to future generations, albeit selectively. Some voices were heard and listened to, others were dismissed or ignored. This implied that narratives were not only documentation of social life, but were also tools for its organisation, since they determined the remembered, valued, accepted or rejected aspects of social life. The results also showed the potential for storytelling to build cohesion and mutual recognition, and/or to constrain expectations when dominant stories de-legitimized specific identities or experiences.

These interpretations were predominantly in line with previous studies on collective narratives, community coherence, digital interaction and marginalised identities. Evidence of the importance of shared stories to build care and solidarity among queer and transgender youth (Jackson Levin et al., 2020) highlighted the accomplishments of chosen family stories. The result on how collective memory affects openness to groups was similar to that of other studies that have shown that national coherence is associated with the willingness to recognise historical narratives from other parties (Mana et al., 2019). The findings regarding the connections between community narratives and identity strategies and conflict were

also similar to those in religiously divided settings (Mana et al., 2021). Findings of the importance of digital spaces for previously marginalised voices included the research findings of O'Neill (2018), who found victim survivors using Reddit to share their experiences and to be recognised. The correlation between narrative authority and interpersonal power found was consistent with evidences found in post-conflict communities (Telaku et al., 2021). The online realities were fractured to align with recent research which showed that digital platforms could exacerbate social organisation and political polarisation (Waller & Anderson, 2021). The importance of counter-narratives in reclaiming identities was confirmed by the research on trans advocacy and online community formation (Jackson et al., 2020). Last but not least, the changes in social presence due to mediated communication were related to phenomenological descriptions of interaction in mediated environments (Lindemann & Schünemann, 2020).

The results had important theoretical, social and practical implications. In theory they helped to strengthen the social constructionist view that the human experience was not something that happened in isolation to the individual, but through shared language, interaction and culturally shared meaning. Socially, the findings pointed out the need to be mindful of the possibility of dominant narratives influencing notions of inclusion and exclusion and access to social legitimacy. Communities that allowed more than one story were more likely to have space for difference, acknowledge injustice in the past, and have some room for marginalised experience. From that perspective, teachers, community groups, culture centers and governments could offer tools such as participatory storytelling, oral history projects, public

conversation and digital archives to be tools for the preservation of multiple memory and for the purposes of social inclusion. Special focus needs to be placed on the "gate keepers" of the narratives and who was included in the stories. The use of digital mapping spaces was also subject to careful moderation and media literacy, as the very platforms which allowed participants to lend their voice to projects also had the capacity to spread misinformation, fuel polarisation and engender different interpretive communities that have little engagement across differences.

These results have to be interpreted with regard to some limitations. This study was of a qualitative, narrative review type, and the findings were thus influenced by the spectrum, the disciplinary focus and the focus of the concepts of the literature chosen. Differences in terminology and theoretical frameworks used across the different sources may have precluded direct comparison in the review, as the review extended beyond the traditional boundaries of sociology, psychology and anthropology to include media studies and cultural studies. Inclusion of publications in English may also have resulted in a lack of representation of locally produced scholarship and community narratives in other languages. In addition, the general emphasis on human experience did not allow for an in-depth analysis of particular communities, geographical areas, historical contexts, or story genres. The conversation was held about digital and face to face storytelling despite having different social contexts. Therefore, future research needs to explore specific populations in comparative and longitudinal studies, incorporate multilingual and Indigenous sources and study changes in the way narratives are transmitted from one generation to the next, from one crisis to another, from within to without, from one technology to another, and from one social power to another.

5. Conclusion

Community narratives became strong social forces that influenced the perceptions of identity, memory, belonging and reality for individuals and groups. Collaborative narratives created and circulated links local experiences to broader histories, enabling communities to hold on to cultural knowledge, pass on values, and make sense of social transformation. Narratives are also not neutral, however. Dominant accounts were likely to perpetuate established norms and power structures, whereas other accounts and counter-narratives opened up opportunities for the voices of marginalised groups, resistance, and reclaiming identities. The results also revealed that collective memory was based on selective remembrance - some memories were remembered and others were forgotten or muted. Digital spaces increased people's possibilities to participate, allowing them to share experiences from across geographical and cultural boundaries. Notably, they brought in issues of misinformation, polarization, partial visibility, and disunity on implications of reality. Storytelling in the community was then a means for unity and a place of dissent.

An enriched understanding of processes of narrative can be used to inform more inclusive education, culture, and policies. Incorporating a variety of storytelling approaches can help improve recognition, empathy, and social inclusion, while decreasing social exclusion. Researchers should focus on specific community, multilingual traditions, and Indigenous narratives in the context of evolving technologies and practices, as well as on the changing nature of digital storytelling to better understand its role in shaping the human experience across generations, conflict, migration, and technologies in rapidly evolving social contexts.

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