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Common knowledge: reflections on narratives in community

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ABSTRACT Drawing on ethnographic and narrative research with eighth grade students from rural New Hampshire, this article explores the rich complexity of narratives built in a communal context. In close-knit rural communities, such as the one at the center of this article, personal stories may become part of a larger communal history. As such, narratives retold as communal stories highlight the relational context in which stories are crafted and underscore the ambiguity of memory, the multiplicity of truth, and the dynamics of power within a community. Here, communal stories strip individuals of the ability to craft individual narratives, as personal stories serve to create a larger communal understanding of events and history. However, for narratives of trauma in particular, as in the case at the center of this article, communal narratives may also serve as therapeutic, lightening the burden of unspeakable knowledge through the shared experience of knowing, remembering, and retelling what might otherwise remain silent. Consequently, narrative researchers must attend to the relational context in which all stories are constructed.

KEYWORDS: *adolescence, gender, narrative, qualitative research methods, rural*

Introduction

My interest in exploring the construction of communal narratives developed in response to my research with eighth grade students at a school in the rural community of Fairfield,¹ New Hampshire, USA – a tiny town nestled in the eastern foothills of the White Mountains. I had come to Fairfield to hear how these students described growing up in a small community and how rural life influenced their identity development. Because I was an outsider to the community, I spent the first six months of the school year observing the 40 eighth grade students at Fairfield School and collecting ethnographic data. I attended classes, ate lunch in the cafeteria, observed student government meetings, cheered on the sidelines at athletic events, and met with Fairfield School faculty and community social workers. This initial research helped me to establish a strong sense of

rapport with the students and revise my research methods in preparation for narrative interviewing.

During my ethnographic study, I met with the eighth grade English classes at Fairfield School once a week to lead a reading and writing workshop. Reading and writing activities invited students to examine identity formation in novels and biographies and to respond through their own writing. These workshops also provided me with an opportunity to contribute to the Fairfield community.

One of the readings the eighth grade teachers and I selected for the workshops was Lois Lowry's (1993) novel, *The Giver*. Lowry's story depicts a utopian society that relieves its members of pain and suffering through a rigid system of sameness and control. In the isolated community presented in *The Giver*, memories are held by a single individual, and the novel underscores the consequences of this, questioning how memories are stored, recalled, narrated, and shared. Throughout, Lowry returns to the central image of the river coursing through the community. In her Newbery Honor Acceptance Speech awarded for *The Giver*, Lowry (1994) commented that she intended the river to symbolize the flow of a community's history, in the way it constantly pushes forward, merging, shifting, changing course, and carrying water from one place onto another. Our reading of *The Giver* and my ensuing conversations with Fairfield students altered my understanding of narrative research methods.

Although I had planned for the eighth graders to discuss their own individual memories in response to *The Giver*, the conversation turned toward the river pulsing through their own community. One student recalled hearing about a devastating fire that polluted a portion of the river. Another student remembered his father carrying him outside in the middle of the night to see the fire engulfing a tannery along the river bank. Although the eighth graders were only four or five at the time of the Fairfield fire, the class became animated around this memory. Several students remembered how the blaze lit up the night sky. Others recalled the lingering smell of smoke for days afterward. One student told the class that her cousin lost his job after the fire. Another student said he still finds scraps of leather in the river when he goes fishing.

As word spread through the school that the eighth grade students were discussing the Fairfield fire, teachers stopped by the classroom to share their own memories. One teacher recalled losing all the food in her refrigerator as a result of a lengthy power outage following the fire. Another teacher reminded the eighth graders that some residents had to evacuate their homes due to the chemical vapors spewing from the burning tannery. In listening to the students and teachers share their memories, I began to see a new pattern emerging as I followed the way each story joined with another.

Narratives as relational acts

The communal discussion of the Fairfield fire enabled me to re-consider the ways in which narratives might be constructed and experienced by multiple

narrators, particularly in a small and isolated community. In response, I revised my interview strategy, inviting students to participate in interviews with a group of their peers. Undoubtedly, interviewing groups of students – similar to focus group interviews, although actually my groups were not so directly focused – altered the shape of the narratives, privileging the collective voice over that of the individual. Madriz (2003) argues that postmodern and feminist researchers have found that conducting research with focus groups shifts the balance of power away from the researcher. My research, grounded in relational theory (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976; Miller and Stiver, 1997), demonstrated the way in which narratives of the self are *relational acts*. Many approaches to narrative research (Atkinson, 1998; Clandinin and Connelly, 1994; Coles, 1989; Gergen and Gergen, 1986, 1988; Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Lieblich et al., 1998; Parry, 1991; Riessman, 1993; Rogers et al., 1999; White and Epston, 1990) emphasize that individual narratives are connected to those of others. My research confirms the relational nature of narratives and reveals the social dynamic through which shared accounts are constructed.

In tight-knit communities such as Fairfield, close connections with others blur the boundaries between public and private knowledge. Narratives about experiences which many community members share mirror this blurring, resulting in stories that are built collectively. In this way, the meanings individuals take from their own experiences are inevitably shaped by others, and, as a result, an individual's sense of identity often shifts to reflect his or her community's values, beliefs, and relationships of power. Communal story-building in personal narratives is far from static. As multiple narrators amend each others' retellings of events, each story reshapes the narrative and complicates notions of linear storytelling. The strength of collective narratives lies in this ability to create meaning from multiple and overlapping storytellers – a powerful force from many streams. Narrating a story in relationship can also mean that other members of the community share in the joy or burden of the telling and retelling. At the same time, the nature of close relationships in a small community proscribes what individuals believe they can vocalize, as relationships with others influence what stories are recognized, valued, or dismissed, or dammed. As such, how a community responds to a narrative shapes an individual's self-understanding and the control individuals have over their own stories.

Using one example from my group interviews with eighth grade students, I raise questions about what it means to narrate a story in community, the uses of such a method, how collaborative story-building shapes an individual's sense of self, and the strengths and limitations of this approach.

Ethical considerations in narrative research with rural children

My prior work in rural communities and previous study of rural adolescence (Seaton, 2004) prepared me for the possibility that narratives of trauma might

emerge within my conversations with students and necessitated that I take seriously the ethical considerations of soliciting such stories. My research in Fairfield was carried out for my doctoral dissertation, and my explicit discussion of ethical considerations needed to pass through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for academic research involving human subjects. The IRB required that I submit a copy of my permission forms for review; these forms required written permission from a parent/guardian for students to participate in the ethnographic and narrative aspects of my study and the publications arising from this research. I also required individual students to provide their own verbal and written permission to participate in my study.

Diana was the last student to volunteer to participate in interviews. In my first weeks at Fairfield School, the middle school faculty informed me that Diana had survived a serious trauma and required special learning accommodations, such as being able to move freely during classes or leave class without permission to speak to the nurse. Although it was clear the teachers knew the details of Diana's trauma, I did not ask for more information, in part to protect Diana's privacy, but also to protect myself from knowing. At the time of my research, Diana was already receiving supportive services and counseling in and outside of school.

It is with great caution and the deepest respect that I retell Diana's story here. Diana made it plain that she wanted her story to be known on her own terms, and my discussion of the way in which stories overlap and carry each other within a community highlights her struggle to find her own voice. She fully realized that I was in the school conducting research and that I would 'tell' and publish about this, including the story she shared with me about her rape. It is my hope that by retelling Diana's story carefully here, tracing the twisting streams joining with her own words, I offer an account that attends to the complexity of narratives as relational acts. I do not mean for Diana's story to flood beyond her control once again, but rather to channel this story into something meaningful and powerful – to carve out a new course for a terrible story so that it might carry its readers and listeners to a place of new understanding.

Many different voices contributed in telling the story of Diana's rape, and what follows explores the questions raised by such communal constructions of narratives. In an isolated town where residents were bound by close networks of association, Diana's rape was public knowledge within the community. This is an aspect of rural life that Diana and her peers took for granted, but surprised me as I came to see how difficult it was for students to maintain confidentiality in their small community. Likewise, some voices in the community (such as those of teachers and school administrators) carried more authority than others. I believe it was directly because of the dynamics of power and the students' struggles for self-authorship in their rural town that the participants wanted their stories to be known, in their own words. Diana and her classmates

expressed deep frustration that their perspectives were frequently dismissed or misunderstood, and they were unambiguous about sharing their stories with me. My role as an outsider offered the girls a fresh opportunity to define themselves when they shared their stories with me, and Diana's story – told in chorus with Eve, Emily, and Cassandra – demonstrates how deeply enmeshed individual narratives may be within a community.

Diana's river

My interview with Diana, Eve, Emily, and Cassandra opened with a discussion about experiences when the girls felt they were not heard or believed by adults in their school and community. In response, I asked the girls to tell me a story about a time when they had to talk to an adult about something important and this adult listened to them. The following exchange took place in response:

Emily: One time when you (looks at Diana) told us, we told our mother, and she did something about it.

Diana: Yeah. Well,

Erin: So, one time you (Diana) had a problem?

Diana: Yeah.

Erin: And you told Eve and Emily?

Emily: And we told our mother because we couldn't keep it in anymore. We kind of felt it was wrong.

Cassandra: Was it about Rick?

Emily: Rick.

Eve: Rick.

Erin: And you told?

Emily: And some other people.

Erin: And you told your mom, and your mom helped?

Cassandra: What'd your mom do?

Eve: She called Gwen and she called the police and stuff.

Diana: No. (inaudible) told Gwen first.

Eve: Oh yeah.

Erin: Who's Gwen?

Diana: My foster mom. I call her – I don't call her mom.

The *it* in Emily's first sentence was left unspoken, decidedly ambiguous. Coupled with the glances the girls gave each other, I sensed that we were approaching something deeply personal and did not push for more information.

Cassandra's question, 'Was it about Rick?' opened the conversation further, revealing their shared narratives of a story that once was Diana's secret. 'Tell her about Rick,' Cassandra prompted a reticent Diana. Rather than narrating the story of Rick herself, Diana chose a different course, asking Cassandra to explain in this way:

Diana: I want Cassandra to (explain who Rick is).

Cassandra: Can I?

Diana: Yeah. You can.

Cassandra: He raped her. (pause)

Having Cassandra take over the narrative and give voice to the unspeakable trauma of Diana's story marked a critical turning point in my interview; this act simultaneously took control away from Diana and yet shared in unloading Diana's burden. Cassandra's narration of Diana's story took three words: 'He raped her.' Cassandra's 14-year-old voice was clear: 'He raped her,' not, 'She was raped,' assigning Rick power as agent and holding him responsible for his actions.

Cassandra's telling loosened something in Diana. Diana explained that Rick was her brother's best friend and had been close to her family for many years. As Diana began to speak, Eve, Emily, and Cassandra provided further scaffolding for the story:

Erin: *When was that?*

Diana: Oh, like a year ago.

Erin: *So what happened? How did you – what did you?*

Eve: And then he did it when she was like–

Cassandra: He's been doing it since she was, like, eight.

With her friends' support, Diana revealed the multiple layers of trauma she endured, the repeated rapes, and later the realization of what was happening, her decision to tell, and the aftermath of the videotaped gynaecological examination and questioning.

Diana's narrative had a muddled quality about it that is not unusual in narratives of trauma. Writing about the process of reconstructing a narrative, Herman (1992) and Rogers et al. (1999) both attest to extraordinary use of language that narrators may employ to reconstruct such narratives, often revealing inconsistencies, gaps, reversals, and silences, as in the following:

- Erin:* *Were your friends helpful to you? [to Diana]*
- Diana:* *Oh yeah.*
- Erin:* *Yeah?*
- Diana:* *I was the one who told 'em. That's how.*
- Eve:* *Me and Emily were the first ones to know. And then we told our mother.*
- Diana:* *Adrienne, too.*
- Eve:* *But it must have been really hard to tell your friends.*
- Cassandra:* *My brother.*
- Erin:* *It wasn't hard to tell them?*
- Diana:* *I was, like, hey this kid made me have sex with him.*
- Cassandra:* *My brother wanted to beat him up.*
- Eve:* *You didn't really do that! You had a hard time telling us.*
- Diana:* *She said—*
- Cassandra:* *Yeah.*
- Diana:* *Where were we? Weren't we inside of my room?*
- Emily:* *Our room. Our room.*
- Diana:* *Like, doing Truth or Dare or something, and you guys said, 'Truth. Like, have you ever done it or anything with a boy?'*
- Emily:* *Whatever.*
- Eve:* *No.*
- Cassandra:* *I don't know how you told me.*
- Diana:* *I was like.*
- Eve:* *You were crying.*
- Diana:* *Of course I was.*
- Erin:* *Of course you were!*
- Emily:* *You were saying that, 'Please don't tell anybody.'*
- Eve:* *Yeah. That was up in our room and you told.*
- Diana:* *I told you I tell the truth during Truth or Dare.*

The dispute over when and how Diana first revealed the knowledge of her rape highlights the relational landscape of narratives, and, subsequently, the way in

which truth in the story is defined through multiple perspectives. Where Diana said it was easy to tell her friends about being raped, Eve and Emily recalled that Diana struggled to share her story; Diana could not remember or name the exact context in which the disclosure took place. The girls challenged each other, building off of each other's comments, amending their own versions of the narrative. This moment calls to mind Lowry's image of the river, its shifting currents constantly reconstructing the story, demonstrating that narratives are not static, but alterable, influenced by the context in which stories are revealed and to whom.

The active process of constructing a story was heightened by the way in which the girls built Diana's story as a communal narrative, revealing the layers of their agency, listening, telling, and retelling this story within the story itself. Diana's story hinges on a communal storytelling, in which, as Diana states, everybody in her small town not only knows about the trauma, but also becomes part of the story itself. Following Diana's choice to share the story of her rape with Eve and Emily, her narrative took on increasingly complex layers of disclosure. The thread of Diana's story became woven into the public space of the community, spinning out from Diana to Eve and Emily, their mother, Gwen (Diana's foster mother), the police, Diana's teachers, Diana's other peers, and finally the narrative context of this interview and piece of writing. With every new layer of telling, Diana's story takes on new meanings; revisions and interpretations multiply as every new narrator and listener reconstructs and understands Diana's story in her or his own words. Narrators not only rebuild Diana's story but add elements of their own reactions to the trauma, locating themselves as agents within the story. For example, in making the moral choice to tell Diana's story to their mother, Eve's and Emily's retelling mobilized a response from the adults in Diana's community and, in turn, indelibly altered Diana's story.

In the following passage, Diana articulates the rippling effect of her trauma when she was forced to tell her teachers about her rape:

Erin: *Were any of your teachers good help?*

Diana: *My teachers didn't know till like a month ago.*

Erin: *And did they help or did they not help?*

Cassandra: *Remember – they talked – they all talked about it at that meeting.*

Diana: *Yeah. I had a meeting for my (IEP) plan. And they were, like, talking about it in the meeting, and they made me cry, and I was, like, uncomfortable.*

Cassandra: *Wouldn't stop when you asked them to.*

Diana: *I was like, 'I want to stop talking about that. I don't want to talk about that.' And they're like, 'Well, we need to.'*

Erin: Wow.

Diana: So, I just sat there, listened, left. And Mr. Johnson was talking about my vaginal exam.

Erin: *That's aw – that must be so uncomfortable.*

Diana: I really – I really just don't like male teachers talking about my–

Erin: *Sure.*

Diana: Parts.

Here, the story of Diana's rape shifted to a new public level within her community, despite Diana's active protest. Asked to repeat her story to her teachers, I wondered if Diana's discomfort not only came from the increasing exposure of her rape and her body, but also from the knowledge that with each new layer of telling she is forced to relive the memory of the experience. Diana's remembering and retelling heighten her own awareness of this trauma, and each person who hears Diana's story becomes another person whose presence might remind her of this memory. Although her name was withheld, the story of Diana's rape was even published in a community newspaper, catapulting the communal knowledge of her story even further.

In the face of the public aspect of Diana's narrative, I wondered how difficult it was for her to develop a coherent story of her trauma when she faced challenges from others who believed they, too, had a claim to her story. The murkiness of truth in communal narratives was most evident when Eve asked if Diana was pregnant after the rape:

Diana: I wasn't, well, yeah.

Eve: I thought you were pregnant?

Emily: Yeah.

Cassandra: Shut up.

Erin: *Is that for real? Is that true?*

Diana: Yeah. I got it done, like, before, like, if I was already, like pregnant for, like 5 months, then I wouldn't have, because, I would have known that it already started growing, but it barely even started growing, like inside of me.

Cassandra: You were, really?

Diana: Yeah. You didn't know that? I didn't tell you?

Eve: I thought you were, like, not pregnant at all.

Cassandra: I think you did tell me, but I think I just forgot.

Here, Diana's story is confusing. Within this passage, she uses the word *it* three times, a repetition that implies metonymy (Rogers et al., 1999), or a condensed meaning that seems to stand for the many unspeakable layers of this passage – the physical rape, the videotaped gynecological exam, and the subsequent discovery she was pregnant. Diana's response, 'I wasn't, well, yeah' contains a revision that may come from wrestling with questions and knowledge too terrible for any eighth grader to face. Was she really pregnant? How does Diana define and understand pregnancy? How does this stand against the backdrop of her rape? I believe I hear Diana actively trying to craft a narrative that my question, 'Is that true?' only makes more confusing. For Diana, truth is not yet fixed, and the questions and challenges to her story only seem to complicate her developing narrative understanding.

I mark this moment as one of Diana's bravest. She doesn't back away from the complexity of her narrative, the trauma, or the context in which she is retelling this story. Diana knows that I am a mother; throughout my time in Fairfield she asked me questions about my pregnancy. I have no doubt that Diana was acutely aware of the connection we shared, having both been pregnant, and the very real differences in age and circumstance that brought about our pregnancies. Here, again, I might have been another person who believed she had access to one truth about Diana's story. For Diana, then, to give voice to her knowledge of pregnancy and mothering in the context of our relationship seems wholly courageous.

Telling, as Diana knows, alters her relationships. The story of Diana's rape is made more difficult by her family's friendship with Rick and his family. Diana explains:

Diana: [Rick's] little sister was my best friend, too. Now, I don't even talk to her no more. She doesn't call me or anything.

Emily: Well, she used to.

Diana: I mailed her a letter.

Emily: She kept doing it.

Diana: Yeah, but she didn't know.

Emily: Yeah.

Diana: Because we weren't allowed to tell (inaudible) because he was over 18. But the police kind of like, they had to tell him, because they had to know to stop calling our house and emailing us, and stuff. It was starting to become, like, harassment. And, like, we were really getting sick of it. So, they went there, like, and questioned his little sister, and that's when they started putting it all together.

Weaving her way backwards again, Diana reveals another layer in the rippling effect that her rape had had within her community. In such a small

town, overlapping relationships between Rick's and Diana's families make contact between family members unavoidable. Living in an isolated, tight-knit community heightens the possibility of Diana's contact with her perpetrator or his family, reminding her that she is neither safe from harm nor free from this story.

For Diana – who has been cut off from close personal relationships and forced to reveal intimate parts of herself in the most public of spaces – questions about intimacy, sexuality, privacy, and her ability to craft her own identity are paramount. In a community where many of Diana's friends, teachers, and neighbors have started to craft their own versions of her story, forging her own identity and story in the face of so many competing voices will require great strength.

Streams into a river

The rural students I interviewed told stories that revealed how their experiences were enmeshed in community connections. In a small town, individual stories inevitably overlap and influence each other, creating a context in which narratives of the self are built in relationship to others. This is particularly evident in Diana's case, as it is the context of communal storytelling that allows her narrative to open within the interview. While Cassandra, Eve, and Emily assist Diana in speaking what is unspeakable to Diana, their stories also blur the edges of what is real, challenging Diana's story and imposing their versions over hers. Within Diana's community, her story is told and retold, published in the newspaper, and spread in circles of teachers and students, as others speak over Diana's words, rewriting her version of events. In retelling Diana's story again, I, too, propel the flood of this narrative forward, but with her words, her silences, her speaking, as central.

While individual narratives provide an opportunity for researchers to gather information about personal meaning-making, such stories exist as only one piece in a larger puzzle. Narratives of the self, however, are strongly embedded within the culture and voices of the surrounding community. Clearly there are strengths and limitations to listening to narratives told in community. Particularly, this privileges a collective story over that of the individual. In Diana's case, it is easy to see how Diana's words could be lost if a researcher is not careful to document the fact that threads of the communal narrative overlapping Diana's story surround her own narrative, shape her self-understanding, and limit the degree of control she has over this narrative. Relationships between narrators are imbued with power, and researchers must be attentive to the ways in which communal stories contradict, cover over, dismiss, or challenge each other.

However, narratives of common knowledge offer a compelling and richly rendered account of experience and highlight the social context in which narratives are created. There is a risk that giving control of memories to a community may

invite differences of interpretation, even conflict. Similarly, in inviting members of a community to narrate a story collectively, researchers relinquish a degree of control and must tolerate ambiguity, because communal narratives with multiple storytellers, perspectives, even contradictory storylines, will certainly diverge from a linear path. However, the richness of communal narratives lies in exactly this. Telling stories of identity and community are not singular acts, and each person articulates narratives shaped by community and context, revision and relationship. It is imperative that narrative research addresses the relational nature of story building. Concerning traumatic events in particular, communal narratives may well lighten the burden of knowledge by sharing the experience of knowing, remembering, speaking, what might otherwise remain unspeakable.

NOTES

1. This research was conducted for my doctoral thesis at Harvard Graduate School of Education and conforms to the standards set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for research with human subjects. The names of people and places have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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