



# DIGGING FOR INNER GOLD

STORYTELLING AND PEOPLE IN  
VULNERABLE CIRCUMSTANCES

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THE AURUS PROJECT

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## Preface

Storytelling brings people together. A simple story can help those who have to cope with difficult circumstances. These were the ideas that encouraged a team from DW-RS productions (Amsterdam, the Netherlands) to think that a European Erasmus+ grant could link people around the topic of applied storytelling and vulnerability. The project was named Digging for Inner Gold, the Aurus Project, and an international team was formed with four organizations that use storytelling and creativity in social work and one academic institution. Our first meetings were online due to the COVID-19 pandemic spreading across borders. We had to adjust ourselves to the new circumstances and meet through Zoom rather than in person. This created opportunities to join hands in a digital way. We had regular online meetings and invented different ways of discussing and creating opportunities to work together. It was only later that we could meet in real life. We also held hybrid meetings where people met online and offline. Thus, we were able to continue working even as COVID-19 continued spreading around the globe and some team members were infected.

The Dutch team consisted of Arjen Barel, Hamed Rahmani, Juliette Eggink, Hester Tammes (DW-RS productions), Peer Smets, and Greta Troup (VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands). The Greek team was made up of Maria Vrachionidou, Anezoula Katsibiri, and Giorgos Evgenikos from the Mythos organization, Korissia, Greece. The Hungarian team consisted of Anna Racz and Dorka Szucs (Kepes Alapítvány, Budapest, Hungary). Finally, there were two teams from the UK: Helen Mill, Lauren Bianchi, and Shona Cowie (The Village Storytelling Centre, Glasgow, Scotland) and Sita Brand and Charles Tyrer (Settle Stories, Settle, England). All played complementary roles in the Aurus project, but Arjen Barel played a crucial role. He was the foundation of the Aurus project; he brought people together and created opportunities for making the project a success. We also could not have worked without the help of the staffs at DW-RS productions and the connected Storytelling Centre Amsterdam.



## Introduction

This literature research explores how storytelling can be used to improve the well-being of people living in vulnerable circumstances. Below we will show an example of how a group of elderly in vulnerable circumstances, called the 'golden men', embrace storytelling in a way that creates a step-by-step approach for increasing their well-being.

Gold! Everyone carries some inside. Some people wear it around their neck, or round their wrists and fingers. With some you have to make some effort, get closer, maybe dig a bit, before you get to see it. And there are people with whom the gold is deeply hidden. They got overthrown and were unable to pick themselves up again, lost their self-esteem and became socially isolated. Sometimes the gold is buried so deep that people themselves stopped believing they ever had any... Europe is facing a growing group of people on the verge of social isolation or already disconnected from society. Many of them think that their story doesn't matter (anymore), that they don't matter anymore. And they don't have or can't find the tools to combat these thoughts. The partners in this project truly believe that everyone's story matters, that these people matter as much as everyone else and that they can be helped to realise this (again) if they do have the right tools and know how to use them to empower themselves. We have experienced and witnessed many times in our work that being able to express oneself well and being heard contributes to one's self-esteem; that telling a story, however simple, enhances a person's capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness. Thus, if we can develop tools borrowed from storytelling techniques and carefully tailored to people who think they don't matter anymore, we trust we can help these people to empower themselves and find their way back to society. And by making these tools transferable to professionals like social workers, coaches, community workers, etc. who work with them and to others who are interested, more people will

be reached and hopefully helped. By working with the unique stories of people in these groups, we want to bring their pride and passion to the surface, encourage them to dream again and open them up to new possibilities (DW-RS producties, 2020).

The text above shows the focus of the Erasmus+ project Digging for Inner Gold, also named the Aurus project. Here, storytelling and vulnerability play an important role. Storytelling has become popular in recent years, but not everyone understands the power of telling a story and how it can be used. Storytelling can help establish self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem among participants. People grow by being heard, by assuming that their story can exist and that it is important to listen to.

Storytelling, according to Serrat (2008), has been used in many societies. Some countries such as England, Scotland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Norway, India, and Japan have a tradition of storytelling, while others such as the Netherlands do not. Still, the popularity of storytelling is growing. Stories and narratives are often regarded as similar, but the terms are defined differently. A story reflects an event or memory, while a narrative links a number of stories that are related. Narrative refers to the culturally rooted structures that can be used to create stories. From a psychological perspective, narrative is a basic structure of human meaning-making. Narratives can be either dominant or subordinate. A dominant narrative shows which norms and values are perceived as 'normal', whereas subordinate narratives, containing all that differs from the dominant narrative, are perceived as less valuable. Similar to a dominant narrative is a master narrative. Those who do not conform to the master narrative<sup>1</sup> are marginalized, which has negative impacts on their self-esteem and confidence. Storytellers see stories as a sequence of events and memories, which is somehow in between the story and the narrative (e.g., Barel, 2020; McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Although some people say that they do not have a story or that they do not see the value of their story,

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1 'Master narrative' refers to culturally shared stories/narratives that deal with the expectations and standards of belonging to a particular community and explain how one fits into that community (McLean, 2016).



everybody has many stories worth telling. Storytelling can be a good tool for attachment and personal growth, and it can aid the development of soft skills and competencies such as improving one's self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-image. For example, elderly people may tell stories about their past, passing down their history and personal experiences to others. Such stories can help in discovering common ground that links people across generations. Migrants can strengthen their sense of identity by telling stories about the region they came from. In business, storytelling can be used in the process of change and the development of leadership (Barel, 2020).

Storytelling can also have a social impact, especially regarding societal transformation and collective behaviour change. It can lead to respect for others, even when they share different viewpoints. The challenge is to foster understanding in such a way that alienation between groups will diminish. Conflict between groups can be solved through reconciliation, which storytelling can help achieve (Barel, 2020). When storytelling is used as a tool for transformation, it is called applied storytelling: applied storytelling is the use of storytelling and storytelling techniques to stimulate change, both personally and socially. This begins with a complete unity between narrator and narrative on a more extended and equal basis: a common ground (Barel, 2020, p. 50).

Let us look at a specific case of applied storytelling that offers insight into what a possible impact of storytelling may be. In Amsterdam, a group of elderly people with migration backgrounds meet every week in the library, where they follow interactive lectures on history, arts, politics, technology, human rights, democracy, and the like. In addition, they participate in excursions in Amsterdam, which helps them to establish friendships with each other. Despite these activities, individual group members struggle with loneliness that is due to several factors: low socioeconomic status, bad health conditions, and feeling like they have little control over their own lives. Such loneliness is also prevalent among elderly people without migrant backgrounds. Communities can offer a variety of support to help elderly people feel in-

cluded. However, helping elderly people with migrant backgrounds feel included may be particularly challenging in the contemporary political climate (Bouchalikh, 2018). Here, storytelling may be used in this context to support a better understanding between the elderly and younger people.

Applied storytelling can evoke strong emotions, and facilitators may be confronted with participants who are struggling with serious problems. Sometimes storytelling can provoke individual or collective psychological or emotional traumas from the past. Trauma stories are a sensitive area for both tellers and listeners. For the tellers, there is the fear of reliving the situation and not being able to cope with those memories. For the listeners, the stories may cause feelings of powerlessness and may also trigger unexpected personal or vicarious trauma. In applied storytelling, the role of listeners and tellers may also change. It is often the teller who is in charge, especially when it concerns people in vulnerable positions. However, listeners can also share something about themselves. Such sharing is often valued in a positive way, but it must be done with care, as complicated emotions are involved and sharing trauma stories involves risk. The teller's agency is important when sharing their stories, especially when sharing stories of trauma: their right to ownership of their own stories must be maintained. Everyone responds to sharing and hearing stories in their own way. The facilitator must therefore create an atmosphere in which everyone's boundaries are respected, including the facilitator's. Applied storytelling in this sense is not therapy, but it can help people who want to deal with their trauma. The willingness to share an experience of trauma with others may be a first step towards (professional) treatment (see e.g., Barel, 2020). As we mentioned earlier, our focus in this book is on storytelling and how it can support people in vulnerable circumstances. To understand how storytelling can benefit those in need, we must first understand some of the issues concerning the concept of vulnerability.

## Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a simultaneously ambiguous and dynamic concept. It stands for 'strength' as well as 'weakness' and may be interpreted both positively and negatively. Vulnerability may also be a problematic concept, 'since its connotations with femininity and dependence as well as weakness and victimisation invoke a problematic image' (Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2018, p. 5). The concept also has overlaps with other concepts, which we briefly discuss in this section. Within a social group context, vulnerability is needed to enable the creation of common ground. However, people are often afraid of showing vulnerability, and rightly so, as vulnerability puts one in a position of greater (social) risk. Springhart's (2017) article 'Vitality in Vulnerability' states that the discovery and revaluation of vulnerability are essential for what it means to be alive, to be human:

Enhancing Life means for me to think about vulnerability in a way that distinguishes between vulnerability as a value of life and vulnerability as something threatening, endangering and worth fighting against.

To understand life's vulnerability, we should differentiate between universal human (ontological) vulnerability and contextual vulnerability.

Springhart (2017) argues that because of universal human vulnerability, it is not possible for any human life to be invulnerably. Birth and death mark the vulnerable transitions in which the interrelated dependency, fragility, and bundle of possibilities ahead and behind become real. Human life is susceptible to harm and love, to transformation and violence, and to disease and decay. Human life is therefore vulnerable. This universal human vulnerability is a shared condition of every human being.

Contextual (situated) vulnerability addresses the level of vulnerability in specific social, cultural, and environmental conditions and the conditions under which vulnerability is life-threatening and endangering. According to Springhart, both types of vulnerability are important:

In order to enhance life, we have to keep the ontological and situated vulnerability together. Why is that important? If one would reduce vulnerability to its ontological dimensions, it would lose its transformative power and also the realism in taking the human condition seriously. If one would reduce vulnerability to its situated dimensions, one would run the danger of discriminating against vulnerable social groups which would then be seen as deficient, weak, or even not fully accountable for life (Springhart, 2017; original *Italics*).

Storytelling has the power to help people in vulnerable circumstances discover how vulnerability can be transformed into vitality. However, it is important for professionals to consider certain questions: How does the vulnerable group or person in vulnerable circumstances define themselves? What type of narrative is suitable and to what purpose? Is it a matter of a 'makeable' world, if at all possible? In the context of ontological vulnerability (universal human vulnerability), this lack of transformation of vulnerability into vitality is impossible, because we are primarily afraid of losing our vulnerability (i.e., our life). This lack of transformation eventually results in an increased vulnerability, often involving shame.

Paradoxically, it is not the struggle for invulnerability that enhances life and gives room for vitality, but the venture of vulnerability. The venture of vulnerability enhances vitality because it strengthens the susceptibility to change and transformation (Springhart, 2017).

The concepts of marginalization, subordination, and social abjection are often connected to the concept of vulnerability. Marginalization and subordination are commonly used to label people who may suffer from or experience discrimination. Though people in vulnerable circumstances are often marginalized, 'marginalization and subordination invoke first and foremost structures and societal conditions that produce injustice and political action' (Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2018, p. 7). Social abjection refers to demeaning/oppres-

sive rhetoric such as the term 'scum', which some state leaders have used against Roma peoples and asylum seekers. This type of rhetoric requires a call for 'justice, equality, and recognition by such "revolting" subjects' (Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2018, p. 7; scare quotes added). Though the concepts of abjection and vulnerability overlap, abjection 'implies disgust, shame, and fear to a wholly different degree than vulnerability, which does not necessarily have anything to do with disgust but comes up perhaps most often in relation to compassion' (Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2018, p. 8).

Another concept connected with vulnerability is stigma. Pescolido and Martin (2015, p. 91) state that stigma 'is the mark, the condition, or status that is subject to devaluation. (...) Stigmatization is the social process by which the mark affects the lives of all those touched by it'. The word stigma refers to the negative labels given to people, places or objects. Stigmatizing as a verb reflects a social process. Bos et al. (2013) distinguishes between different kinds of stigma: public stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association, and structural stigma. Public stigma implies that those involved in stigmatizing others are labelling those others with negative perceptions and interpretations. Self-stigma includes the social and psychological impact of processes of stigmatization. Stigma by association is the social and psychological reaction to a person associated with a stigmatized person. And structural stigma is the process of institutional and ideological bias against stigmatized people.

Evidence shows that people are often stigmatized, but stigma does not automatically lead to lower self-esteem.

Whereas global self-esteem refers to feelings of personal self-worth, racial or collective self-esteem refers to evaluations of the worthiness or value of the social groups – such as racial, ethnic, or religious groups – of which one is a member (Crocker & Major, 1989, p. 609).

Self-esteem on an individual level is distinct from the self-esteem gained from belonging to a social group. Self-confidence, which is often discussed

together with self-esteem, is how confident an individual feels about their skills or abilities. Though self-esteem and self-confidence often go together, they can also work contradictorily. For example an artist can have high self-confidence but low self-esteem.

Crocker and Major (1989) argue that people use multiple strategies to cope with stigma. Prejudice and discrimination can harm a person's self-esteem, which can have a negative impact on their physical well-being. However, stigmatized individuals should not be seen as merely passive victims. They are often actively involved in protecting and buffering their self-esteem from the prejudice and discrimination they experience. The need for such actions should be seen as an argument for how prejudice and discrimination can damage one's psyche (Crocker & Major, 1989).

Vulnerability can lead to discrimination, which in turn can lead people to join together to form a countermovement. Thus, although vulnerability is characterized by oppression and control, it may also lead to power and mobilization that creates political agency (Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2018, pp. 4–5). Moreover, vulnerability and marginalization do not necessarily go hand in hand: people in vulnerable circumstances can belong to the dominant group, and marginalized people are not necessarily vulnerable. In situations involving vulnerability, it is important to look at how change may take place and how steps can be taken towards increasing well-being. Storytelling can play an important role in this.

## **Well-being and empowerment**

We turn to storytelling because experience and research has shown that the ability to narrate a coherent life story with meaningful connections between past, present, and future is explicitly related to increased well-being. Negative events and difficult life experiences, such as widowhood or unemployment, are linked to dramatic drops in life satisfaction and to feelings of disempow-

erment (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005). Such experiences can challenge one's values, beliefs, and sense of self as well as ideas about one's strengths and role in society or purpose in life. Therefore, reflecting on negative experiences and finding ways to incorporate them into one's identity and life story in a meaningful way can be important for restoring a sense of self, self-esteem, and self-confidence. Applied storytelling may be a useful approach for increasing people's well-being because it can contribute to strengthening their self-confidence and psychological empowerment.

Subjective well-being can be defined as 'people's positive evaluations of their lives, including pleasant emotions, fulfilment, and life satisfaction' (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005, p. 125). Certain elements are necessary for quality of life, such as social relationships and the presence of freedom and other fundamental qualities considered necessary for human dignity. Income level can also play a role in people's happiness. International research has found that to a great extent, income level plays a larger role in individual happiness in less wealthy nations (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005). This suggests that income plays a larger role in determining the well-being of people living at the poverty line in less wealthy nations compared to those in wealthier nations. One reason for this may be that wealthier nations provide a certain level of social security and general support to people with low incomes. Work aiming to increase the well-being of people living in social isolation or poverty or lacking access to basic needs should therefore use approaches that consider how well-being is affected by the societal context.

However, these 'basic' and external elements are not sufficient for well-being in themselves. For individuals, psychological empowerment is a central facet of subjective well-being because of its role in setting and achieving goals. Psychological empowerment can be described as 'people's belief that they have the resources, energy, and competence to accomplish important goals' is a central facet of subjective well-being because of its role in setting and achieving goals (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005, p. 125). Having goals and being able to achieve them are important for psychological well-being. People need to

be able to access the resources to achieve their goals, but they also need the right psychological mindset, such as having self-confidence. Self-confidence allows people to work towards a variety of goals in their lives and is linked to increased happiness (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005).

The concept of empowerment has several dimensions and can be approached from different angles. We can distinguish between internal and external empowerment. Internal empowerment refers to people's subjective feeling that they can control their environment, know their worth, have confidence to express their needs and are aware of the role of oppression in their lives. This kind of empowerment is important for well-being because people's subjective feelings of well-being 'are inherently tied to their beliefs about whether they can achieve their goals' (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005, p. 126). External, or socio-political, empowerment refers to people's actual ability to control or act upon their environment to create positive change (Goodman et al., 2007; Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005). Other aspects of well-being important for empowerment are experiencing positive emotions such as joy, happiness, and love. Empowerment therefore depends on both the external conditions to achieve one's goals and the internal feelings of self-efficacy, autonomy, and competence. In practice, people need to not only believe that they can achieve their goals but also have the energy and desire to take actions towards achieving those goals. Experiencing positive emotions from having successfully achieved goals is important for psychological empowerment. These empowered feelings from successful action can form a 'self-reinforcing loop'. However, the opposite can also happen. Experiencing repeated failures and negative emotions can break the cycle of psychological empowerment, resulting in resignation, depression or 'learned helplessness' (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005, p. 135).

Interventions to support empowerment must therefore address people's personal circumstances so that they can give greater voice to issues that concern them. Even after people have been given more power, interventions might be necessary to address their continuing feelings of powerlessness. Possible interventions include 'education, positive mood inductions, or role models to gain psychological empowerment' (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005, p. 136).



Empowerment can also be found on a collective level. Collective empowerment arises from like-minded people coming together, sharing experiences, and discussing shared solutions. Goodman et al. (2007) argue that collective empowerment serves as a catalyst for individual psychological empowerment because of the dimensions of acceptance, belonging, and emotional reciprocity that exist in a community. Collective empowerment can also enable social transformation because of group solidarity. Understanding the empowerment that happens at the collective level helps us see how the different forms of empowerment are connected and how they can be mutually reinforcing.

Organizations can play an important role in empowerment. In an organizational approach, the relationships between members of a collective tend to become impersonal as rules and regulation take over. The relational approach therefore declines partly or even completely. This implies that collective empowerment within organizations becomes more problematic over time (Smets & Volont, 2022).

The concepts of power at the individual, community, and organizational levels are worth exploring. At the individual level, one can trace 'power from within', which focuses on a person's own qualities, their development of skills and increase in self-esteem and confidence. At the community level, the focus is on 'power with', which includes support from friends, family, and neighbours as well as self-organization and collectives. At a broader political and societal level, the focus is on the 'power to'. This refers to implementing changes such as reducing prejudices, improving accessibility to facilities and sources and influencing laws and regulations (Jacobs et al. in van Regenmortel, 2009). Empowerment is thus a complex, multilevel concept.

It is in the dominant society's interest that oppressed groups blame themselves or each other for their lack of empowerment rather than exploring the stories or narratives that show how the system is to blame. Storytelling is therefore a valuable tool for instigating mobilization.

## Cultural sensitivity towards concepts of well-being

People's concepts of subjective well-being differ across cultures, depending on the existing cultural values, norms, and practices. Approaches that aim to increase people's subjective well-being must therefore consider how experience and understanding of well-being can differ across cultures and within culturally diverse groups. Cross-cultural research has found that the meaning of 'happiness' on a personal level also differs across cultures. For instance, in studies of North Americans, happiness was related to excitement and intense feelings, whereas Chinese people described happiness as feelings of calmness and a state of equilibrium (Oishi, 2010). Happiness is connected to positive emotions in the dominant North American cultures, while in many Asian cultures, both positive and negative experiences and emotions can be connected to happiness. Happiness is also less desirable in many Asian cultures than in North American culture. In northern European cultures, the word 'happiness' denotes luck and good fortune, while in southern European countries, happiness is defined as 'the satisfaction of one's desires and goals' (Oishi, 2010, p. 41). Culture can also shape interactions by influencing body language and how people express their experiences and emotions. For example, concepts of happiness influence how desirable it is to publicly express happiness, such as smiling more or less, and the body language used to express emotions. Research has identified key distinctions between the approaches to well-being in individualistic nations and those in less individualistic or more collectivist nations. Self-esteem and pride are seen as signatures of well-being in many individualistic nations but not in less individualistic nations. Moreover, feelings of interdependence are more highly associated with well-being in less individualistic nations, whereas feelings of independence (e.g., pride) are associated with well-being in individualistic nations. Thus, experiencing and maintaining positive emotions in relation to others is associated with well-being in less individualistic nations, whereas positive emotions related to the independent self are associated with well-being in individualistic nations. There are also cross-cultural similarities in the meanings of well-being. For instance, irrespective of culture, people who reported having internal (as opposed to externalized) motivations for their actions experienced higher well-being (Oishi, 2010).

Highlighting culturally different understandings of well-being makes it clear that approaches to improving well-being and strengthening empowerment need to be sensitive to the cultural context, and that people's cultural background influences their interpretations and interactions in the group setting. Goals may also change. Within our toolkit, the focus is on increasing well-being through individual pride and self-esteem, which echoes the individualistic cultural approach to well-being. When interdependence and positive emotions towards others are understood as important for subjective well-being, the goals change. For example, in a storytelling workshop involving the 'golden men', socially isolated elderly men with a non-European immigrant background, storytelling helped to create a community and collective that strengthened their pride and sense of self as related to the group. This approach focused on the creation of positive emotions towards others and feelings of interdependency, whereas a more individualistic approach might not have been as useful for this specific group. Having a cultural sensitivity to well-being can help improve outcomes when working with culturally diverse participants and storytelling practitioners.

## Investigating into the impact of storytelling

For this book, we conducted a literature study to investigate the impact of storytelling on the lives of people living in vulnerable conditions. Our central research question was this: What role do storytelling practices play in identity formation and transformation for people in vulnerable circumstances?

To help answer that question, we asked the following sub-questions:

1. What impact does storytelling have on contemporary society?
2. What role can the community of practice play in the development of storytelling practices?
3. What types of stories and narratives are there?
4. What role do life stories play in the development of identity formation?
5. What is the transformative potential of storytelling?
6. What role does social work have in storytelling?

## Overview of chapters

We begin this literature study by looking at the societal context in which storytelling takes place. This is followed by an exploration of the role of communities in a mutual learning process and a discussion of stories and storytelling within the context of contemporary society and the smaller units of communities. We pay specific attention to life stories and identity development and the transformative potentials of storytelling for learning, personal development, empowerment, and well-being. In addition, we provide insights into how storytelling is used within social work.

In chapter 1 – **Societal analysis: Living with COVID-19 and risk society** – we detail the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on increasing inequality and vulnerability in order to better understand the societal background of contemporary society. Although COVID-19 cannot be isolated from other crises around the globe, such as climate change and the gap between the rich and the poor, we focus on the pandemic because it can be understood as a mass event of social suffering that increases the vulnerability of groups already in vulnerable circumstances. Contemporary societal approaches to dealing with risks and crises have been described as creating a ‘risk society’ that aims to manage and eliminate potential risks with a top-down approach and thereby recreate ‘normality’. Little room is left for bottom-up approaches that are connected to the everyday life challenges people face and that offer possibilities for adjustments to the local circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic has confronted us with decades of unlimited economic growth, consumption, and mobility. The gap between the poor and the rich has been increasing, thus hampering the development of equality and equity. Moreover, solidarity and mutual empathy have become more vulnerable.

We then turn to the concept of resilience as a popular mode of surviving personal hardships and life within a fraught system. While resilience remains important for facing and coping with hardships, there are challenges in relying on resilience. When resilience means ‘bouncing back’ to a deficient normal-

ity, it becomes a hindrance for change and improvement for the individual as well as for the improvement of and resistance to inequalities and oppression in society. Constantly 'bouncing back' is unsustainable over time. We must find approaches that involve 'bouncing forward', in which improvisation and the development of various elements for establishing a sustainable system can take place. Such change can enhance life and create new states of being.

After this contextual focus, we look into how groups work with storytelling. Our focus will therefore be on communities in which mutual learning plays an important role. Chapter 2 – **Communities of practice and learning together** – explains the usefulness of communities as social learning systems, commonly known as 'communities of practice'. Communities of practice can be defined as 'groups of people who genuinely care about the same real-life problems or hot topics, and who on that basis interact regularly to learn together and from each other' (Wenger et al., 2002, in Pyrko et al., 2017). Learning is a social process that requires a community, a practice, and an identity. Identity is central to communities of practice because identity formation is a work in progress that is shaped by both individuals and the collective to create coherence over time. Sharing of knowledge is integral for creating feelings of belonging to a community and is achieved when the individual experiences mutual engagement, imagination, and the feeling that they are part of the collective. Learning happens through the sharing of tacit knowledge, personal experience, and social competence. It involves creating a shared repertoire of communal resources such as stories, styles, artefacts, tools, routines, and language in the community. From this perspective, we can understand learning as a transpersonal knowing process of thinking together that helps individuals understand the common problems of real life. We combine this collaborative learning approach with the approach of appreciative inquiry. Instead of problem-solving, which often involves external 'experts', this approach seeks to stimulate positive change within communities by emphasizing success stories and mobilizing local resources within the community. Focusing on positive questions and on how constructive power can be increased leads to positive images and positive actions. We suggest

that storytelling, as a form of sharing knowledge and life stories, has several links to collaborative learning processes and thinking together through processes of transpersonal knowledge. Learning often requires a community that triggers people's experiences of belonging and positive associations. Finally, these processes of learning and knowing are especially important for a community of practice that focuses on dealing with intimate and personal issues such as mental health, resilience, and difficult life stories. By relying on the resources, assets, and stories of its community members, a community of practice fosters ownership and local knowledge.

We live in a world surrounded by stories. Stories are not just objects that exist 'out there'. They are also part of us, and they travel through us in our own stories about identity and community. Stories convey meaning. They are thus a channel for understanding and expressing our values, morals, and ideas, and our social relations. In chapter 3 – **Stories, narratives, and storytelling** – we introduce stories and storytelling from different perspectives, and we define key concepts such as narrative, story, and storytelling. 'Narrative' refers to the culturally available story structures used to create stories. In addition, from a psychological perspective, narrative is a fundamental structure of human meaning-making. Stories are organized forms of multiple narratives that are combined in a way that illuminates meanings, moral lessons or provocations. Storytelling is inherently social in character because it is a shared experience between the teller and the audience in a specific context. Both the storyteller and listeners share and shape the story, illustrating how stories are co-created by nature. Finally, we end the chapter with a brief introduction to the different kinds of stories – life stories (autobiographical stories), fictional stories, master narratives, and alternative narratives – that recur in the subsequent chapters.

In chapter 4 – **Life stories, storytelling, and identity development** – we turn to socio-psychological perspectives and research to gain a better understanding of the connections between stories and identity and of how storytelling can have positive effects on people's well-being and empowerment. Narrative

and narrative processes are thought to be at the heart of identity and identity development. In other words, we understand ourselves through stories, and stories create our sense of self. This chapter explains how the narrative structure of stories, such as chronology, causality, and coherence, helps us create a sense of certainty and predictability in an otherwise unpredictable world. Through autobiographical reasoning, people make meaningful connections and explanations between the past, present, and future as they create life stories. These stories are important because they create a sense of self-continuity over time. People who experience problems with identity, such as struggling to create a sense of self through time, also often struggle to see themselves in the future. Working on our narrative identities is especially important for dealing with negative and difficult life experiences. Through re-writing our stories, our different narratives, we can coherently integrate difficult experiences into our life stories as moments of personal growth or increased insight and wisdom. Life stories can be viewed as existing in a larger 'ecology' of stories. Our life stories are co-constructed and shaped by social relations, the stories we tell about others and the stories others tell about us. Culturally shared narratives, such as master narratives, also influence our individual life stories. Master narratives are distinctive because they communicate the standards for belonging to a community. Those who deviate from master narratives often experience negative consequences such as rejection, prejudice, and exclusion. Resisting master narratives by actively creating alternative narrative constructions is common among those who deviate, but it is a challenging process for individuals. Overall, being able to construct and maintain a coherent narrative identity is considered important for people's well-being, which suggests that being able to create and tell one's life stories is an important skill for a healthy life. However, some research suggests that autobiographical reasoning about certain experiences does not increase well-being. We discuss alternative options to autobiographical storytelling for resilience and communicating one's identity in positive ways.

In chapter 5 – **Transformative potentials of storytelling for learning, personal development, empowerment, and well-being** – we review literature and research from various perspectives that suggest how and why storytelling can positively influence people’s personal development and increase their well-being and empowerment. Not everyone’s story is accepted by their audiences or the wider culture. Thus, for many people, simply being able to voice their story and to share it with like-minded people who are willing to listen can be profoundly meaningful. Storytelling can have an emancipatory function, both for storytellers and listeners, when individuals are in a space where they can counter dominant and oppressive stories and develop their own story and voice. Storytelling can create community; it can expand the knowledge of a group as a whole and help people learn to understand and identify with others. By sharing difficult experiences, people are able to examine those experiences in the context of broader social structures and cultural narratives, which can help clarify existing barriers, limits, and lack of support for their personal efforts. We also discuss fictional stories, which are seen as especially powerful for enhancing well-being and empowerment. Fictional stories allow us to explore other worlds and people through imagination and the playfulness of a story, thus providing us a safe distance from which to engage in self-reflection, improve our social skills, and develop our own identities. Certain kinds of stories, such as fairy tales and artistic stories, might be especially useful because of their genre characteristics that use symbols and imagination and leave the role of interpretation to the reader or listener.

In chapter 6 – **Social work and storytelling** – we elaborate on some promising methods in social work for using applied storytelling with groups in vulnerable circumstances. We describe narrative therapy and how it can be applied in practice. We also discuss the role of the storyteller-facilitator and central aspects to storytelling in practice such as voice, silences, and listening. We detail the potentially positive and negative effects that listeners can have on both the shaping of stories and the identities of storytellers as they tell their life stories, and especially the positive impact of having attentive listeners. We also make connections between storytelling as sharing knowledge and



as learning in communities of practice and discuss ethical issues for relationship and community building in diverse and multicultural societies. Finally, we conclude the book by looking back to the findings in our literature research and to our expectations for storytelling and people in vulnerable situations.

1.

## Societal analysis: Living with COVID-19 and risk society

This chapter provides insights into contemporary society, which is threatened by different kinds of crises. Today, interaction between people depends on the conditions of late modernity. One of these conditions is risk society, which refers to society's systematic way of dealing with inevitable risk, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We begin by discussing the pandemic and then place it in the context of risk society. To cope with the circumstances of risk society, we can use storytelling as a method for building resilience.

### COVID-19 and social suffering

Journalists, celebrities, and public health experts initially saw COVID-19 as an equal opportunity killer (Blow in Trout & Kleinman, 2020). However, we find that it is the poor and the marginalized – groups in vulnerable circumstances – who are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and those with existing health issues who suffer the worst versions of the disease.

It is clear that this disease, like almost any other, seeks out and exploits the weak threads of our social fabric, stratifying exposure, illness care, and outcomes along familiar social, economic, and racial lines (Van Dorn et al. in Trout & Kleinman, 2020).

The term 'social suffering' is coined (...) to emphasize how ordinary social life everywhere is experienced as pain and suffering at least as much as joy and happiness, and that collective pain and suffering is normative and normal' (Kleinman, Das & Lock in Kleinman, 2012). Social suffering also refers to extraordinary human experiences from the social consequences of individual

catastrophes to those of collective disasters. COVID-19 is a mass event of social suffering, one that increases the vulnerability of groups already living in vulnerable circumstances. It therefore requires an integrated, caring response. As Springhart (2017) describes, 'Enhancing life means both to see and to live: the fundamental vulnerability that makes a human being human, loving, affective, empathetic and able to trust, but also frail and endangered – and the situated vulnerability that requires attention, awareness of multi-layered diversity and mutual love and respect'. In this view, storytelling can be a form of caring response.

Stories can support groups in vulnerable circumstances and encourage them to affect positive change in their lives. In this sense, stories are an important tool 'as they provide people the freedom to tell and illustrate their point of view and their somatic, social and emotional experience' (Good in van der Geest, 2014). In any given culture, a variety of ways exist to express distress. Expressive modes are culturally constituted in the sense that they initiate particular types of interaction and are associated with culturally pervasive values, norms, generative items, and health concerns (Nichter in Hinton & Lewis-Fernández, 2010). The challenge is to listen to those expressions of distress. People may use idioms to express what they often see as their hopeless situation. One example of an idiom of distress is excessive thinking, often referred to as 'thinking too much' or 'thinking a lot'. Such idioms are described throughout the world and are commonly discussed in relation to cultural concepts of mental illness or psychological distress. However, most of the time, distress refers to a common experience of reflecting on personal and impersonal problems situated in economic and social-political dimensions. Idioms of distress are often communicated in a psychosomatic context, somaticized with bodily symptoms such as headaches, muscle tension, and sleep problems. We can therefore speak of an 'embodiment' of social suffering: that is, the biological incorporation into the body of the social and material world. There is no other way to be in the world and to perceive and sense the world than through our bodies. The body is the nexus of the multiple strings that attach us to the world. It is the 'book' that can be read to explore our lives (Csordas in van der Geest, 2014).

Vulnerability cannot be separated from its context. We must therefore take into account not only societal factors such as the pandemic crisis but also the contemporary societal context of risk society. Besides COVID-19, people have to deal with many other human-made crises. This implies that we must become accustomed to uncertainty and risks and that the control of society is not always in the hands of human beings.

## Risk Society

During the modernization process, society has become more complex and people have become increasingly interdependent in a globalizing world. Some outcomes of modernization have been dystopian and have left people to live in undesirable circumstances and risky industrial environments associated with risks that go beyond the personal, such as nuclear radiation or physical and chemical toxins in food. The societal responses to these changes created what Beck (1998) calls risk society, 'a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself' (p. 21). Examples include nuclear waste, pandemics, climate change, and air and water pollution. Such risks are widespread around the globe:

The triumphant procession of the industrial system causes the boundaries between nature and society to become blurred. Accordingly, destruction of nature can no longer be shifted off onto the 'environment' either, but as they are universalized by industry, they become social, political, economic and cultural contradictions inherent in the system (Beck, 1998, p. 154).

According to Beck (1998), all kinds of crises can react to each other. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to a health crisis, an economic crisis, a housing crisis, and a financial crisis. The main issue is how society deals with risks and the related crises. But what is a crisis? A crisis is a societal situation that goes together with destabilization. It concerns an unpredictable event that impacts the expectations of the parties involved, impacts the way

the involved parties work, and generates negative results (Coombs, 2007). Government attempts to control a situation are based on their perceptions of the chaos and disorder associated with it, and they often have to improvise. Today, the COVID-19 pandemic is still seen as a big risk, even though more people will die due to smoking, poverty, and traffic accidents. We see that society is changing and that COVID-19 is a virus that disproportionately affects those who are medically or socially vulnerable.

When people have to cope with a crisis, they see the situation as one of chaos and begin using control strategies to try to regain control of the crisis (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). However, unstructured actions aiming to cope with the crisis tend to cause even more chaos rather than provide solutions. Information and communication issues can also add to the chaos. Governments are generally unable to effectively control all information and communication streams. However, crisis management research has shown that bottom-up actions and streams of information can contribute greatly to an efficient crisis response (e.g., Olsson, 2014; Solnit, 2010).

There is a tendency among (European) governments to use a top-down management approach in dealing with crises (Hadfield & Zwitter, 2005). Their assumption is that all actions should lead to control of the situation. However, top-down interventions often tend to lead to more chaos (Alink et al., 2001). The flip side of aiming to control the situation is that there is less space for bottom-up approaches, which are spontaneous unstructured actions (Drabek & McEntire, 2003; Henstra, 2010). Crisis management research has shown that bottom-up actions can contribute greatly to an efficient response to crisis situations. Such approaches are linked with people's everyday lives and therefore can be adjusted to the local circumstances (e.g., Olsson, 2014; Solnit, 2010; Smets et al., 2021). The cooperation involved in bottom-up approaches strengthens a sense of ownership among participants and fosters responsibility for their interactions (Smets & Azarhoosh, 2019).

Geldof (2020, p. 34) stresses that despite being written long before the COVID-19 crisis, Beck's book about risk society predicts what has happened during the pandemic. His frame of thinking about risk society was accurate, even though he never experienced this particular crisis. Ghorashi (2020) shows how COVID-19 harmed normal routines in such a way that everyone has been impacted to a larger extent than they are used to. The pandemic confronted us with the past decades of endless economic growth, consumption, and mobility. The gap between the poor and rich sections of society is growing, which hinders the development of horizontal relations between different layers of society. Moreover, solidarity and mutual empathy have become more vulnerable. There have been two kinds of reactions to the COVID-19 crisis: (1) a reactive attitude that aims at establishing the 'normal' and (2) a reflective attitude that looks to the future by searching for solutions to societal problems. The two reactions use short-term and long-term perspectives, respectively. In general, COVID-19 has acted as an accelerator and a magnifying glass. The inequalities between societal groups have become more visible as have the hidden processes of exclusion and the limitations of our actions (Ghorashi, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a change from a neo-liberal market approach towards an increasing governmental role. Governments have invested a lot of money in vaccinations, face coverings, and subsidies for entrepreneurs and airlines.

Risk society and related interventions are widespread around the globe. Today we have to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, but we can expect more crises in the future, such as the ongoing climate, energy, and food crises. In addition to this future perspective, it is also important to consider colonial history and its impacts on contemporary society by looking into decolonial and postcolonial contexts.

## Colonial, decolonial, and postcolonial contexts

Colonialism still plays a role in discussions about injustice today (Wekker, 2016). Injustice in the colonial period meant that some stories could not always be told, which led to sensitive stories being neglected. It is a well-established thought within critical studies that not everyone's story and way of understanding the world has an equal opportunity to be accepted as legitimate. Indian feminist critic and postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak (1988) famously posed the question 'Can the subaltern speak?' Her question is a critique of the colonization of knowledge – the idea that the privileged groups in society define the ways of speaking about the non-privileged groups, often in ways that do not benefit them. Spivak's question draws attention to the unequal power relations involved in knowledge production. Think for instance about how mainstream stories about non-western immigrants in Europe tend to portray them as culturally deficient, unwilling to work or to integrate, and as threats to society (Farris, 2017). Because of their status in society, non-western immigrants and other marginalized groups have fewer opportunities to rebut these broader narratives and have their stories legitimized. The systemic processes of silencing can be understood as a form of injustice that hinders certain groups in claiming knowledge about their own experiences (Fricker, 2007).

One type of silencing is 'testimonial injustice', which refers to situations in which the stories told by individuals and groups are considered as lacking credibility because of the prejudice of the listener. An archetypical example of testimonial injustice is that of a black person who is not believed by the police because of negative racial bias. On a cultural and structural level, testimonial injustice refers to the injustices in people's knowledge that happen when the broader range of cultural images and stories lack the necessary perspectives to explain their experiences. For example, in a society in which the concept of sexual harassment does not exist, people who experience this kind of overstepping of personal and sexual boundaries are given 'an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience' (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). It becomes difficult to define or talk about one's experiences in ways that



gain acceptance from others and from society at large, perhaps also even by oneself. An effect of this can be that people become less aware of the injustice or unfair treatment they have experienced, which could result in personal blame and shame and a lack of societal change.

Although the experiences of marginalized groups may be silenced by dominant cultural narratives, so-called resistance narratives or alternative narratives can develop within these groups (Fivush, 2010). Resistance narratives challenge the explanations and moral imperatives of the dominant narratives and aim to make their alternative stories legitimate. However, even when marginalized groups have a good understanding of the story they want to tell, they might find that their story is not accepted, because their style of expression is not adequately understood by the majority group. Their story does not 'fit in', and listeners are unable to 'hear' their story or do not allow them to articulate their story, thereby 'silencing' them. On an individual level, one consequence of this form of injustice against marginalized groups is potential harm to the individual's psychology and restraints on their self-development, which ultimately prevents people from becoming who they are (Fricker, 2007). Awareness-raising and the sharing of stories can therefore be a powerful tool for change (Langton, 2009). At the root of sharing stories is connecting people with different backgrounds. In this respect, Marije Blok (written communication) reported that in an Royal Bank of Scotland project in Luxembourg, elderly people told stories to small children who spoke a different language. Mimicry, expressions, gestures, and emotions bridged the language gap. The small children understood what was said, even when it was not in their language.

To understand injustice and the silencing of stories, we look at people in vulnerable situations in the next section. The challenge for society is how to circumvent vulnerable circumstances.

## Resilience

Today, resilience is a popular concept. A degree of flexibility is required in a world that is characterized by risks and insecurity. Research criticizes the concept of resilience due to its neoliberal policies and power mechanisms, which enable and facilitate free market opportunities leading to increasing gaps between rich and poor (Rast et al., 2020; Bracke, 2016; Lehmann & Smets, 2020). Moreover, resilience cannot exist without disaster or threat, but resilience and security are intertwined.

If environmental disasters, deadly viruses, or terrorist groups turn out to be resilient, then resilience becomes indistinguishable from the very threat or disaster that resilience first sought to overcome, and ultimately the distinction between threat and resilience collapses (Bracke, 2016, p. 59).

Still, it is important to provide some insight into different views on resilience. Resilience refers to the ability and flexibility to change, which can take place in different ways. According to Bracke (2016), resilience 'is a powerful idea whose deployment spans the macro-level of ecological and economic systems to the micro level of selves, and the complex circuits of power that connect and constitute these different levels of social reality' (p. 52).

Resilience is often considered the appropriate response to vulnerability. It is the capacity to cope with threatening or traumatizing conditions. In a broader sense, it is the power to get along and arrange oneself with a given situation, which aims at acceptance of the situation and focuses how to live with it. Here again, the distinction between contextual and universal dimensions of vulnerability is important. In terms of involvement in a context, there is no doubt that resilience can be seen as a capability to live on, to survive and cope with threatening situations. In terms of ontology, though, resilience as a basic concept has limits. This is because resilience stops the struggle for improvement, hinders resistance in the political sense and is not open to the

vision of enhancing life (Springhart, 2017). Thus, resilience can be linked with vulnerability, but the possibilities are restricted.

Siemiatycki et al. (2016) distinguish between engineering and adaptive approaches to resilience. The engineering approach shows how a change will lead to bouncing back to its previous state. This can be illustrated by a stretched string that is released and bounces back to its original position. The adaptive approach highlights a new path, where a new equilibrium can be found. Thus, rather than bouncing back, there is a new phenomenon of bouncing forward that creates a new state of being. In addition to these approaches, there are two societal ways of looking at resilience: social and individual resilience. Social resilience implies that groups, as communities of practice, can adapt, sustain, and improve their well-being (Hall & Lamont, 2013). Here, we can also use the concepts of bouncing back and bouncing forward. A typical example of bouncing back is the banking crisis of 2008, wherein banks went bankrupt and many governments rescued those banks without implementing structural changes in the banking system. If instead a new system had been developed in which cooperative banks had a central role, that would have been an example of bouncing forward. Bracke (2016) argues that the well-being of individuals and groups will be fostered by 'social' moves towards institutional, social, and cultural resources. However, classical psychological approaches tend to focus on single individuals who cope with stress and mitigate the effects of risks. Such approaches show how individuals deal with stress, shock, and trauma. Their focus is to investigate 'contemporary operations of power and notably to further explore processes of subjectification that belong to the realm of neoliberal governmentality and biopower' (Bracke, 2016, pp. 61–62).

Components of resilience include 'a response (...) to either immediate or longitudinal adverse changes that are imposed (...) in a context where conditions are complex and uncertain (...) [and] that [they] are successful in restoring stability' (de Valck, 2020, p. 11). The objective of people in vulnerable circumstances is not to save the system, but

to develop the ability of 'letting go and moving on' to nurture the well-being of individuals, groups, communities, and people. In other words, restoring stability by surviving despite systemic troubles and personal obstacles (de Valck, 2020, p. 14, original emphasis).

Resilience can help people in vulnerable circumstances to regain, preserve, and improve their stability. However, Duffield (2016) warns us that ongoing adaptation is unsustainable. This can be illustrated with the example of a poem posted on a lamppost in New Orleans (see Bracke, 2016, p. 71):

Stop calling me  
Resilient.  
Because every time you say  
'Oh, they're resilient,'  
That means you can  
Do something else to me.  
I am not resilient.

As this poem shows, resilience has limits. It is important to understand that resilience can be a powerful tool for coping with problems, but if the problems remain unsolved, there are limits to how much resilience a person has. However, we can establish a system that enables improvisation and problem-solving through the development of a bricolage of new elements. Barel (2020) tells us that empathy plays an important part in resilience. It improves self-image and enables the maintenance of relationships that support one's well-being. Trying to understand another's point of view creates possibilities for coping with challenges. Barel uses the insights from Brené Brown to show that vulnerability is not a weakness, but a sign of courage. In an interview (Economist Radio Podcast, 2020), Brown explained that people in America cannot cope with leaders who show vulnerability when in the midst of a vulnerable situation, but they see telling stories about past experiences of vulnerability as a sign of courage. People do not like listening to 'unfinished' stories of vulnerability, because it is too difficult to deal with, and

they do not know how to react. Listeners want the story of vulnerability to be made into a finished story of redemption (growth from vulnerability) (see McLean & Syed, 2016). With a somewhat different view, Thorne and Mclean (in McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007, p. 268) state that 'audiences do not like to hear stories of vulnerability but of managing traumatic events'.

## Conclusion

People in crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, must cope with social suffering. Storytelling can help increase understanding and support for groups in vulnerable circumstances and can help them cope with crises. It can also encourage people in a crisis to be open to transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that the make-ability of society is not a clear-cut phenomenon. It involves not only people in vulnerable circumstances and society but also governmental organizations. Governmental organizations have to cope with unexpected circumstances, and they tend to use top-down approaches to control the destabilization caused by a crisis. However, this approach does not work effectively. They therefore have to take a resilience-based approach to cope with unexpected circumstances and with a world characterized by risks and insecurity. Another societal context is that of injustice in the colonial period, which still manifests in the postcolonial period. Injustice or feelings of injustice create possibilities for shared experiences. Resilience – a complicated concept – is seen as an adequate response to vulnerability, and it offers possibilities for coping with traumatizing conditions. Resilience approaches are varied. The engineering approach highlights the phenomenon of bouncing back to the original state. However, bouncing forward – derived from the adaptive approach – shows that a new equilibrium can develop. There are also societal ways of looking at resilience: social and individual resilience. Social resilience refers to communities adapting, sustaining, and improving their well-being, while individual resilience encapsulates a psychological approach that focuses on what people can do at the individual level. Resilience can be helpful, but it has its limits, especially if the problematic situation does not change.

2



## Communities of practice and learning together

This chapter discusses how communities of practice operate in relation to storytelling practices in which participants work together to create a shared learning process. Here, a process approach determines how the community works and adjusts to new circumstances. It is therefore important to understand the different elements of a community of practice and the use of different approaches that may guide interventions. Finally, we focus specifically on issues of identity and storytelling.

### Community of practice

Communities exist in many forms throughout the world. In our understanding of a community of practice, we assume that a common learning process in a community is of great importance. Wenger (1998, 2000) stresses that the success of a community depends on the available skills to design the community as a social learning system. Communities of practice tend to focus on learning communities in the workplace, in education, and in other institutional settings. Such a community of practice reflects learning as a process that requires a community, a practice, and an identity. It is the interplay between personal experience and social competence that forms the basis for learning. In addition, social learning needs three elements: a community whose members have a shared view of how they operate, the mutual engagement of members, and a shared repertoire of communal resources such as stories, styles, artefacts, tools, routines, and language (Wenger, 1998, 2000). Insight about the working of a community of practice can also be used for smaller communities. In everyday life, almost everybody is consciously or unconsciously part of a community of practice (e.g., Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practice 'are born of learning, but they can also learn not to learn. They are the cradles of the human spirit, but they can also be its cages. After all, witch-hunts were community practices' (Wenger, 2000, p. 230). Thus, communities of practice have 'different ways of engaging with one another; different histories, repertoires, ways of communication, and capabilities' (Wenger, 2000, p. 232). Shared practices create boundaries between community members and the outside world. However, those boundaries may have a fluid nature. Fluid boundaries enable other learning processes in which knowledge from within and outside the community can be obtained.

It requires a balance between core and boundary processes, so that the practice is both a strong node in the web of interconnections – an enabler of deep learning in a specific area – and, at the same time, highly linked with other parts of the system – a player in systemwide processes of knowledge production, exchange, and transformation (Wenger, 2000, p. 243).

Practice – the social context in which the learning process takes place – involves looking into common historical and social resources, frames and perspectives that nourish mutual engagement and the formation of identity. Identity is important for social learning systems for three reasons. First, identities link competence and experience in such a way that one can identify, trust, and share insights. Second, identities are determined by how a community deals with boundaries. Third, identities nourish how communities and boundaries determine people's view of the world, but these decisions also nourish people's identities. Moreover, identities should be seen as a communal and relational construct (Wenger, 2000, p. 239). 'The concept of identity serves as a pivot between the social and the individual, so that each can be talked about in terms of the other' (Wenger, 1998, p. 145). The social and the individual influence each other and bring both lived experiences together. These insights disagree with the widespread assumption that the individual and the collective conflict with each other as well as with the assumption that one causes problems and the other solves them. Although identities are



not based on conflict or agreements, tensions between individuals and collectives can exist. Identities within a specific practice have an impact not only on the internal community but also on the wider social structures (Wenger, 1998, pp. 145–148).

Through participation, our identities create trajectories in and across communities. This suggests that identities are temporal and are characterized by ongoing processes in different contexts. Being engaged and learning in a practice develops an identity that connects the past and the future (Wenger, 1998, pp. 150–157). Identity formation can be seen as the following:

a work in progress shaped by both individuals and the collective to create a coherence through time that threads together successive forms of participation in the definition of a person incorporating the past and the future in the experience of the present negotiated with respect to paradigmatic trajectories invested in histories of practice and in generational politics (Wenger, 1998, p. 158).

Identities are developed through participation and non-participation in practices. In other words, our identities are shaped by what we are and what we are not. Moreover, our practices are developed by including elements from other practices (Wenger, 1998, pp. 164–165). Identity formation is composed through identification – ‘providing experiences and material for building identities through an investment of the self in relations of association and differentiation’ (p. 188) – and ‘negotiability [which] is just as fundamental, because it determines the degree to which we have control over the meanings in which we are invested’ (p. 188).

Another important aspect of a community of practice is its participants’ sense of belonging. In this respect, Wenger (2000) distinguishes different types of belonging: mutual engagement, imagination, and the feeling that one is part of the collective, which is more than the sum of its members. Belonging is ‘the connection from which we can become grounded and experience the sense

of safety that arises from a place where we are emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically a member' (Block in Skillman, 2020, p. 232).

## Learning by working together regularly

Being part of the community implies working together to solve problems and look for assets that could be used. Therefore, a community of practice deals with issues such as solving problems, tracing information, reusing sources, coordinating activities of community members, reflecting on developments, documenting projects, visiting other projects, collecting knowledge, and identifying what is unknown (Wenger, 1998). There is a widespread consensus about what educational theory implies, which concerns human beings who are 'part of the material world, interacting with it and developing into a interconnect[ion] (...) with the material world in all its local specificity' (Griffiths, 2005, p. 4). By being engaged, people gain the experience of participation and want to be seen as participants. Having relationships with others in combination with identity formation can be seen as a complex interweaving of participative and reifying projections (Wenger, 1998, p. 151).

We may assume that, within a community of practice, some community members are involved and others are not. In practice, there is an interaction between participation and non-participation, and this interaction can be characterized as either peripherality or marginality. Peripherality is characterized by a certain amount of non-participation but participation dominates. Marginality emerges once non-participation dominates, obstructing full participation (Wenger, 1998, pp. 166–167). In addition, one's participation is not always visible to others. Arjen Barel reported about his experiences with applied storytelling wherein a man seemed disconnected and non-participatory until one day he spoke. He had been soaking up information, taking time to learn and listen before he felt able to speak. This shows that it can take time before participation becomes visible to others. In other words, a mix between participation and non-participation shapes our lives: 'how we locate ourselves

in a social landscape, what we care about and we neglect, what we attempt to know and understand and what we choose to ignore, with whom we seek connections and whom we avoid, how to engage and direct our energies, [and] how we attempt to steer our trajectories' (Wenger, 1998, pp. 167–168).

'Knowing, learning, and sharing knowledge are not abstract things we do for their own sake. They are part of belonging' (Eckert in Wenger, 2000, p. 238). Modes of belonging include engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement is an individual process that refers to 'active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning' (Wenger, 2000, p. 173). Imagination 'creates images of the world and seeing connections through time and space by extrapolating from our own experience' (Wenger, 2000, p. 173). Alignment coordinates 'our energy and activities in order to fit within broader structures and contribute to broader enterprises' (Wenger, 1998, p. 174). Let us look again at learning within a community of practice:

Groups of people who genuinely care about the same real-life problems or hot topics, and who on that basis interact regularly to learn together and from each other (Wenger et al., 2002, in Pyrko et al., 2017).

This view of learning within a community is useful for applied storytelling aimed at the development and empowerment of people in vulnerable circumstances.

Learning can be seen as a transpersonal knowing process of thinking together, which creates the possibility of understanding real-life problems. Through mutual help and exchanges of knowledge of social practices, mutual learning becomes manifest. The steps for sharing knowledge are a process that Polanyi (1962, 1966) called 'indwelling'. To understand the process of indwelling, we must first look at the concept of knowing. A distinction can be made between explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge refers to books, information, records, files, and documents. Tacit knowledge, on the

other hand, is gained through experience. When speaking of tacit knowledge, Polanyi (1962, p. 601) explains that 'there are things that we know but cannot tell'. Cycling is a good example. We cycle but do not know what we are doing. It is almost impossible to create a reference work to explain how to cycle, how to use your muscles and such. This type of individual knowledge is difficult to transfer to another person or group. However, people can learn to cycle by practicing. Thus, indwelling takes place. In reality, there is often interaction between explicit and tacit knowing. In addition, tacit knowledge is shaped by attitudes, experiences, and cultural contexts (Polanyi, 1962, 1966). Importantly, indwelling does not separate body and mind, which is also similar for thinking together (Wenger in Pyrko et al., 2017). The link between body and mind is needed in a world where the mind gets more attention and the body less, or vice versa. Our bodies help us to organize what we know and feel to be, what we understand about how to be, and what and how we can change. By linking both body and mind, knowledge and pedagogy become more grounded (Coetzee, 2018).

The processes of learning and knowing are important for a community of practice that deals with intimate and personal issues such as mental health, resilience, and life stories. Pyrko et al. (2017) stress that communities of practice work well through a collaborative learning process of thinking together, which could create the possibility of understanding a common problem. Thinking together includes sharing tacit knowledge in combination with non-routine problematic circumstances. In their framework of knowledge, Kuhn and Jackson (in Pyrko et al., 2017) distinguish between routine and non-routine learning interactions. Routine learning interactions are involved when obtaining knowledge in practice. Such knowledge involves the transmission of information or the request for information. If non-routine problematic circumstances are combined with mutual forms of knowing and learning together, instruction and improvisation play an important role. This suggests that thinking together generates the development of knowledge in an intensive way.

From a feminist perspective, Griffiths (2005) supports and enlarges the view on learning through communities of practice. She warns us that power relations in society – often male dominated – can and probably will be reproduced in communities of practice. Behaviours based on individualism, competition, performance, calculation, and hierarchy are often associated with masculinity. Moreover, men tend to promote neutrality in mainstream meetings. Because these masculine behaviours have become culturally accepted as the norm, men's seeming 'neutrality' masks their masculine approach. According to Griffiths, a feminist approach might be better.

A feminist approach to embodiment, diversity and participation would help to break the self-reproducing power of this masculinity within communities of practice. At the same time, communities would be more open to the diverse talent and imagination available, and would be able to develop better forms of practice, suitable for all the people (Griffiths, 2005, p. 8).

Values such as listening, empathy, and turn-taking are usually associated with femininity are often considered inferior, but they may be more beneficial than masculine values in a community of practice. This is not because they are 'feminine' values but because they are socially oriented. They centre community and caring, feelings and sharing vulnerability, which can make the operation of communities of practice more fruitful.

Communities of practice can have different types of community development: needs-based community development (NBCD) and asset-based community development (ABCD). NBCD is an exogenous process in which leaders mobilize external sources. In this case, the emphasis is not on self-sufficiency but on problems. Community members believe that the leaders know what is good for the members. This kind of development emphasizes a deficit mindset (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003).

Although active citizenship is rooted in a community, it cannot be assumed that everybody is part of a community. New participants can be mobilized through ABCD. This is an endogenous approach in which methods are developed to mobilize sources from within the community. Sources could include physical and social assets such as cycle clubs, community centres, and social networks. The emphasis in ABCD is on sampling stories of the community's successes and analysing the reasons for such success (see Figure 1). The ABCD approach requires a steering committee made up of a representative group of community members (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). It emphasizes strengthening community members' capacity by ensuring their right to access necessary local resources, which can be achieved by establishing relations with local sources that can be used for coping with common problems. The approach also offers possibilities for the community's sustainability.

Figure 1. Problem-solving versus appreciative inquiry



Based on Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005, p. 13.

ABCD is strongly based on appreciative inquiry, a process that stimulates a positive change within communities. Its emphasis is on success stories underpinning community action. Appreciative inquiry is a method that focuses on how constructive power can be increased and positive questions can lead to positive images and positive actions. This differs from a problem-solving approach, which involves identification of the problem, its analysis, and its treatment. In practice, problem-solving is usually done by professionals and not by the target group. See Figure 1 for an overview of both approaches (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). When we look into a community of practice in which storytelling plays an important role, it is clear that we build on the insights derived from appreciative inquiry.

## Conclusion

Members in a community of practice are linked through a mutual learning process that is facilitated through processes of, for example, identification, mutual engagement, and belonging. Learning together is a transpersonal knowing process of thinking together, a process that is the basis of understanding real-life problems. The steps that should be set for sharing knowledge are what Polanyi called indwelling. In this respect, a distinction is made between explicit knowledge (from books, information, records, files, and documents) and tacit knowledge (things we know but cannot explain). There are two types of community development: NBCD and ABCD. NBCD focuses on exogenous processes in which leaders mobilize resources from outside the community, while ABCD is characterized by an endogenous approach in which resources are mobilized within the community. Within ABCD, sources could be mobilized by community members. ABCD approaches include problem-solving, which focuses on finding ways of solving problems, and appreciative inquiry, which emphasizes strengthening the best-working items.

3

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## Stories, narratives, and storytelling

This chapter explores how storytelling takes shape and how the concepts of stories and narratives can overlap but still differ from each other. It also offers an overview of various types of storytelling: life stories, fictional stories, master narratives, and alternative narratives. All types offer different insights and experiences.

### Stories and defining concepts

We live in a world surrounded by stories, from the everyday stories we share with others to stories we encounter in books, (popular) media, news cycles, religion, history, and mythologies. We often consider stories as specific artefacts, such as a narrative that is bound within a book (Shaw, 2013). Yet stories are in constant motion through time and space, and they become changed and reworked, such as when a new interpretation of a classical play is set up in a modern theatre or when mythologies from another time and culture change and take on new meanings suited for the present day.

We also tend to think about stories as something separate from ourselves; however, stories are not only around us, they travel through us in our stories of identity and community. Stories make up such a large part of our lives because we use them to make meaning of the world around us. 'Stories are everywhere, but they don't spontaneously occur. They are drawn from our experiences and the incremental accumulation of the experiences of others. They develop as a way of understanding the world' (Shaw, 2013, p. 2). The meaning-making function of stories is what makes them such a fundamental part of human life (Rossiter, 2002). We understand events, actions, and experiences in our lives through narrative, as episodes or stories that are given a specific meaning in the context of our life and life story, rather than as simply being a series of incidental events that 'just happened'. By conveying mean-

ing, stories become the channel for understanding and expressing our values, morals, ideas, and social relationships. There are many different kinds of stories: traditional and ancient fictional stories, such as fairy tales, myths, and legends; modern fictional stories found in books and popular media such as films; religious stories; cultural stories such as histories, oral histories, and master narratives, as well as the alternative narratives that counter them; family stories; and personal stories such as autobiographical narratives and life stories. Stories are always on the move, as both the tales and protagonists travel to new cultures and media (Tatar, 2014). Fairy tales seep into modern fictional media stories, and legends and myths weave together with religious stories, and all of these stories influence and contribute to the stories of families and individuals.

The two concepts 'narrative' and 'story' are often used interchangeably when talking about stories, but they can have different meanings in some contexts. When used separately, narrative refers to the facts and factual elements of stories, the 'plot' (Palacios, 2014). Narrative also refers to the way a story is structured (Parfitt, 2019). We might understand narratives as culturally available patterns or scripts that provide a framework for connecting experiences, actions, and events in a way that makes them socially and culturally meaningful. They often include elements of coherence and continuity and therefore help us explain and 'overcome' discontinuities and incoherencies in our life experiences. The act of narrating means to structure facts and factual details, experiences, and impressions of events into a story that follows a certain script, pattern or rhythm, in order to give them meaning. The influential scholar of life narratives Jerome Bruner has described narrative as a reflective process in which we become able to make the uncanonical (i.e., experience) into canonical (i.e., story) (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). From a psychological and developmental perspective, 'narrative' is understood as a fundamental structure of human meaning-making. Events, experiences, and actions in our lives are experienced through narratives, and we use narratives to understand and make sense of those events, experiences, and actions. Reflection upon our lives through narrative is seen as important

for people's 'ongoing construction and reconstruction of the life narrative' (Rossiter, 2002).

'Stories', then, can be seen as an organized form of multiple narratives combined in a way that illuminates meaning or moral lessons. Compared to 'narratives', 'stories' are creative and they communicate values, meaning, and morals (Palacios et al., 2014, p. 2). Storytelling consists of many elements such as concept, character, theme, structure, scene execution, and voice (Palacios, 2014, p. 2), and as we will explore in the next chapter, storytelling is closely connected to our embodied identities and social relations. We can view storytelling as a subjective social process. This means that storytelling is 'a shared experience between a teller and an audience that cannot be extricated from the larger context in which it takes place' (Palacios et al., 2014, p. 2). Because of the inherently social character of stories, which involves reciprocity, interaction, and shared experiences, some storytellers advocate for the concept of story-sharing (Barel, 2020). Both the storyteller and the listeners share and shape the story; this is why we advocate for a view of stories as co-created (McLean, 2015; Palacios et al., 2014). Stories are not only in the mind of the storyteller. They generate images and interpretations in the minds of the listeners, and elements in the process of listening influence and contribute to how a story is told (Palacios et al., 2014; Pasupathi & Billitteri, 2015). Storytelling has roots in oral traditions and is therefore strongly connected to voice and vocalization. However, stories can also be told through dance, movement, music, images, and the written word (Palacios et al., 2014), or a combination of these.

In sum, we refer to 'narrative' as the (culturally available) story structures that people use to help make meaning and make meaningful connections between events, experiences, and actions. Stories can consist of several narratives that include related events and experiences. Another concept, 'narration', is often used interchangeably with narrative. However, discussions about the meaning of these concepts are not clear cut. For example, discussions may focus on whether their meaning is only about telling a story or

whether it should include recounting or relating the story with the details of events, transactions or some action. Greek concepts of narrative and narration, in particular, have led to ongoing discussions.

Storytelling is a social process that involves a co-creation between the listener and the teller. The listener influences how the teller shares the story, and the story generates images in the listener's head as they make meaning of the story.

## Different kinds of stories

We have already mentioned some of the types of stories that exist in the vast world of stories. In this section, we briefly describe the main types of stories that recur in the following sections.

### *Life stories*

Life stories, or autobiographical stories, are stories people tell about their own lives. A central function of narrating life stories is that they create a sense of self-continuity over time (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Life stories tend to include explanations for how people became who they are today. They are important because they give people some kind of purpose that guides their future actions and direction in life (Pasupathi, 2015). Life stories are made up of autobiographical narratives. These narratives are used to make connections and meaning between many different life events and experiences in order to create a coherent life story. Interestingly, cross-cultural research has shown that the importance of self-continuity in life narratives might be specific to western cultures. In Chinese culture, for instance, the goal of narrating life stories was related to developing connections with others and expressing adherence to moral guidelines (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). The concept of autobiographical reasoning refers to 'the dynamic process of thinking about the past to make links to the self' (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007, p. 263). In other words, autobiographical reasoning is how our identity becomes shaped through our life stories.

### ***Fictional stories***

Fictional stories are stories with fictional characters and events. They encompass a wide range of stories, from those that are closely related to reality, based in real places and with people whose lives are realistic, to those that hold a greater symbolic meaning, such as in myths, fairy tales, and legends. Fictional stories have three main characteristics that make them potentially beneficial for individuals. First, they allow us to explore the world from the perspective of others, which can allow us to develop empathy and expand our experience. Second, they simplify and distil events down to the essential components, which make them helpful for learning about the social environment and providing us with social information that we can use to determine our future actions and make decisions in our own lives (Boyd, 2009; Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020). Third, the self-reflection that we engage with when reading or listening to fictional stories can contribute to transformation of one's self and one's own story (Just, 2019).

### ***Master narratives***

There are plenty of stories that exist on a wider societal and cultural level, such as religious stories and national histories. In the context of identity development, it is relevant to look into and explain the role of master narratives for individuals. Master narratives are culturally shared stories that communicate the standards and expectations for belonging to a community and defining oneself within that community. They 'tell us how to belong and how to define ourselves' (McLean, 2016, p. 31), for example, what it means to belong to certain social categories, such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality. We use master narratives to structure our experience and understanding of the world around us, and they shape the stories told in the culture at large as well as the stories we tell about ourselves and others. Because master narratives are repeatedly used by members of the community, they become reinforced and gain legitimacy (McLean, 2015). Master narratives are important for creating social cohesion, but the widespread legitimacy of master narratives also means that following them becomes compulsory, meaning that deviating from the master narrative can make you an 'outcast'.

### **Alternative narratives**

People and groups who deviate from master narratives might resist them through creating alternative narratives. Alternative narratives refer to the master narratives in order to resist their premises and legitimacy for structuring meaning. A good example from today is how gay men and women have resisted the master narratives of marriage, love, and sexuality as something that occurs between two people of the opposite gender. In some countries this has led to increased freedom for people to be with who they love, but we also see how the struggle to establish this narrative continues, as bans on same-sex relationships and discrimination based on sexuality persists across the globe. Alternative narratives can exist counter to the master narratives or, if they gain enough attention, can contribute to changes and development in them, such as altering certain elements in a master narrative or, less commonly, completely overthrowing it. While alternative narratives are forms of resistance, they also build on elements from existing narratives to create new stories that serve their goals. This means that over time, alternatives against the 'initial' alternative narrative will continue to arise when people experience that the initial narrative does not include their experience or story. For example, in resistance to the alternative narrative above, which resists heterosexuality as the norm but not marriage, other alternative narratives challenge monogamy and marriage as defining kinship relations. This narrative also criticizes the initial alternative narrative as being created by those from a privileged class and race in society. For people whose life experiences and stories deviate from master narratives, creating alternative narratives is important on a personal level for narrating a positive and resilient identity, as well as for finding or creating a group to belong to (McLean et al., 2018).

## Conclusion

Although the concepts of stories and narratives are used interchangeably, differences exist. Stories refer to many topics with traditional and/or modern elements and opportunities for change through time and space. It is often assumed that stories are separated from ourselves, but the world in and around ourselves shows that the reality is different. A story is a build-up of narratives that show us cultural patterns, facts and factual details, or scripts, which are building blocks for connecting experiences, actions, and events. This makes stories socially and culturally meaningful. It also means that they can consist of different kinds of narratives.

There are various types of stories, such as life stories and fictional stories as well as master narratives and alternative narratives. Life stories or autobiographical stories include life events and experiences. Depending on the culture, they may have an individual- or group-oriented focus. Fictional stories can be related to reality or to symbolic meanings, such as in myths, fairy tales, and legends. Fictional stories can be helpful for learning about the social environment and related social information for making decisions and dealing with future actions. Master narratives are shared stories within a specific cultural context that show standards and expectations for being part of a community and determining oneself within that community. Such narratives enable the possibility of inclusion and exclusion. Alternative narratives are derived from master narratives. Through alternative narratives, people resist the master narrative's legitimacy for structuring meaning, but they do not reject that narrative completely. The alternative narrative is built on the master narrative.

4





## Life stories, storytelling, and identity development

This section explains how life stories and storytelling can impact identity formation through the use of narratives. It looks into narrative identities as being co-authored and as being embodied in such a way that they are linked with notions of well-being but also with trauma and risks. The focus then shifts to the cultural influence of master narratives and mechanisms of exclusion and belonging. Finally, cultural context and cultural differences are used to contextualize life stories and identity development.

### Identity and storytelling

It is an incredible strength of the human mind to be able to construct identities, to create a sense of stability in an uncertain world, and to bring ourselves into existence through acts of reflection and imagination (McLean, 2015, p. 4).

Insights from social-psychological research provide a good understanding of how storytelling can have positive effects on people's well-being and empowerment. Scholarship within social psychology makes a strong argument for the connection between narrative and identity. In fact, these two are often understood as interlinked; we tell stories to create a sense of ourselves, and we understand ourselves through stories told by others. Before detailing what this scholarship and research has found about the relationship between identity and narrative, we must first define what we mean by identity. We understand identity as the individual's subjective and personal 'I', their sense of self. Identity is an ongoing product, constantly made and remade through our interactions with social, political, and symbolic constructions (Sekimoto, 2012). In this sense, identity is simultaneously individual and relational, im-

aged and material. Identity is a 'process' or a 'problem' in need of constant resolution, and because of this constantly changing nature of identity, identity development is an important psychosocial task (McLean, 2015). People who struggle to create a sense of self through time and to connect their past with the present also struggle to see themselves in the future. Problems with identity, such as fractured identity or an identity shaped by an oppressed or dangerous existence, can cause harm to the individual experiencing these issues, as well as to those around them and to society at large. Identity is therefore about more than the individual's construction of the self; it also has consequences for social and material life. On the individual level, identity problems are often found in people dealing with other challenges such as alcohol abuse, violent behaviour, depression, and other mental illnesses. On a wider societal level, global conflicts can be seen to stem partly from identities built on unstable ground, resulting in aggression over territory, religion, and nationalism (McLean, 2015).

Although we understand identity as constructed, this does not mean that identities are easily changed. Identities are constructed over time through reflective and reflexive processes in which the person makes sense of who they are in the world. Stories are at the centre of the identity process. The stories that individuals tell about themselves are powerful in developing and sustaining social ties, guiding and motivating actions, and creating community (McLean, 2015). The narrative structure of stories, such as chronology, causality, and coherence, helps us create a sense of certainty and predictability in an otherwise unpredictable world. As social scientists, the relevance of bringing in the psychological theory of narrative identities is that it emphasizes identities – and their constructions – as relational processes, rather than as merely individual processes. The relational character of identity is one of collaboration; we define ourselves in relation to others, but also through the stories that others tell about us. We can therefore see the narrative identity as a 'co-authored self' (McLean, 2015, p. 5).

## Narrative identity and life stories

The concept of 'narrative identity' refers to how our identities are made up of stories that define who we are and who we want to be. Stories are important for defining who we are. We create a sense of ourselves through sharing our personal experiences – our stories – with others in countless social interactions (Fivush & Zaman, 2015). Narratives and narrative processes play a significant role in both the construction and the continuous maintenance of our identities. Because narratives and stories are social and cultural products, narrative identity is an inherently socio-cultural understanding of identity. People's narrative identities are largely developed through the sharing and listening of stories among their close relations. It is within the family that we learn to tell stories and our journey of constructing our narrative identity begins; indeed, intergenerational stories and family stories have proven to be critical for understanding the self (Fivush & Zaman, 2015). In addition to using stories told within our family or our communities, we also make sense of our experiences and our position in the world through broader social and cultural frameworks in which we find widely shared cultural stories, histories, and master narratives. We tell stories to make sense of our past and our current position, but also to figure out where we are going. The stories we tell ourselves help to guide our actions (Dings, 2018). When we identify with a certain narrative, our actions that support that narrative are experienced as personally meaningful. For example, a young single mother who is committed to a narrative of independence might find meaning in (sometimes difficult) actions that support that identity, such as working hard and for long hours to provide for herself and her children in order to avoid having to rely on support from others. Our personal stories encourage us to act in certain ways, and vice versa: our actions that meaningfully fit into our life story provide support and confirmation of our sense of self and identity.

There is broad scholarly consensus that people solve their 'problems of identity' through creating life stories (Pasupathi, 2015). Stories are helpful in 'looking back' at our experiences, but they also play a role in structuring our

future experiences. Two central aspects of narrative identity are therefore meaning-making and goal-setting (Dings, 2018). Individuals engage in meaning-making to understand situations and experiences that have happened in their life – be they daily events or larger life events – by determining what is significant in a situation and connecting it to other parts of their life and their life story. Goal-setting involves reflecting upon future achievements, who one wants to become and what one wants to accomplish. Psychologists talk about the concept of ‘life stories’. Life stories are personal stories that provide ‘an account of how the person came to be the way he is and provides a sense of purpose and direction that guides action going forward’ (Pasupathi, 2015, p. 167). The life story explains how the past is connected to the present and the future, with the goal of creating a sense of self-continuity over time (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). The act of making these connections through narrative(s) is called autobiographical reasoning, and it is central for the creation and maintenance of our narrative identity. Some scholars have pointed out that although autobiographical reasoning is important for our narrative identities, in our daily lives, engaging in autobiographical reasoning is rare compared to everyday narration, the stories about our everyday and emotional experiences that we share during family dinners each night or in the context of entertainment and dramatic retelling. Autobiographical stories might therefore be seen as one of ways to create narrative identities. Other ways include stories that express beliefs, values, and ideologies, stories that help us position ourselves in relation to others, and stories that evoke and explore emotions experienced in the past (Pasupathi, 2015).

### **Narrative identity as co-authored**

Kate McLean (2016), a professor in developmental psychology, argues that we can view identity development as a co-authored project. What she means by this is that the stories told within one’s family and the larger culture that one belongs to play a defining role in the stories we tell about ourselves. We see the stories about our personal experiences as being ‘nested within

the experiences of our immediate family members and the stories of past generations, as further nested within the stories of our cultural or historical moments' (McLean, 2015, p. 19). McLean conceptualizes this as 'a narrative ecology'. This means that we need to understand the individual's self-story as existing in relation to all the other stories and narratives existing around them. An individual's personal identity is created in 'the weaving together of a person's own experiences into coherent narratives, but also in the weaving together of multiple layers of narratives that surround the person' (McLean, 2015, p. 20). The development of the individual's identity is dependent upon their engagement and activity in the 'larger ecology', such as encountering the stories of others, and those of society and culture, which is an ongoing, extremely complex, and reciprocal process. This understanding of identity development places people's social relations and the social and cultural narratives and the associated social and cultural narratives at the centre. The idea of a narrative ecology helps us understand not only how people's identities and life stories are influenced by social and cultural contexts but also that they are continuously changing and changeable over the course of one's life.

### **Narrative identity as embodied**

Stories and identities are also situated within material worlds and within our lives and material bodies. Narrative identities have a lot to do with our thoughts, memories, and ideas about ourselves, and as we explained above, narrative identities are influenced by social relations and cultural contexts, but they also have physical or material effects on our bodily movements and actions in the world (Dings, 2018). Bodies are not neutral entities; they are shaped by aspects such as gender, race, and the social and political environment they move through in a specific place and time. People's identities are embodied, for example in the way we speak or walk, and in a ways that can be cultural or gendered, and our bodily self-image, such as our conceptions of our gender identity or ethnicity, is affected by the perceptions of others.

Experiences of migration can provide illustrative examples of how narrative identities are embodied. One's accent when speaking a new language gives away one's story of a different origin. The stories that defined one's identity and group belonging may no longer be sufficient to understand oneself in another cultural and social location. The actions that once seemed so everyday are suddenly not appropriate anymore. Such experiences can evoke strong reactions in people. The Japanese scholar Sekimoto (2012) describes how she 'became' Asian after moving to the United States. When living in Japan, her ethnicity had simply not mattered to her identity, yet now she was forced to reflect upon what it meant to be Japanese or Asian. Moreover, she encountered new expectations and definitions of being a woman in the new society, which made her reflect upon herself as a 'Japanese woman' in the United States. Experiences in which we are physically taken out of our previous contexts, such as long-term unemployment or when migration takes us to another country with a very different culture and customs, can lead to disorientation because of the conflicting meanings between our own narrative identity and the societal narrative about our identity. Acknowledging people's embodiment in the world is thus important because it highlights how material circumstances and changes, physical actions and reactions, also play a role in the development of narrative identities. When people feel like an element of themselves is missing, they feel alienated and not 'like themselves'. They therefore feel a need to reflect upon and make meaning of their experiences in a way that supports their narrative identity and sense of self.

## **Narrative identity and well-being**

Working on our narrative identity seems to be especially important for dealing with negative and difficult life experiences. Experiences such as the loss of a child or involuntary unemployment, for example, can be understood as creating 'disruptions' to our narrative identity because they trouble our understanding of who we are. Fortunately, people have the flexibility to rewrite their stories about difficult experiences and events in ways that make those

happenings meaningful in the context of their broader life narrative. In the rewritten narrative, individuals might integrate such experiences into their life stories as moments of personal growth or as events that led to increased insight and wisdom, which helps to regain the feeling of personal continuity over time. Psychological research has found that positive life events, such as one's wedding day, tend to play a smaller role in defining our narrative identity than do negative life events. Furthermore, reasoning about positive life experiences does not increase well-being. Researchers are not entirely certain why this is the case. One plausible reason is that positive experiences are culturally accepted and fit easily into people's life stories; they therefore do not require much reflection (McLean & Mansfield, 2010; McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Negative life events, however, seem to force us to reflect and make meaning of how the event fits into our broader life story in order to support a coherent sense of self. Nevertheless, positive stories play an important role in creating and maintaining social connections and communicating with others, and they are often used for entertainment and fun and for sharing aspects about oneself without risk (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007).

The ability to rewrite our life stories in ways that make sense to us is important because there is substantial evidence that reasoning about past negative events, as is done in therapy, is connected to increased well-being (McLean, 2015; McLean & Mansfield, 2010). The relationship between reasoning about difficult experiences and increased well-being lies in the importance of finding a suitable and acceptable narrative to explain one's negative experience in a meaningful and socially acceptable way. In the context of the western United States, where most research on this connection has been done, increased well-being lies in the importance of finding positive resolution and personal growth in challenging experiences. This is partly connected to the importance and expectancy of explaining negative experiences through the narrative script of 'redemption', where bad events or experiences are turned into something good (McLean & Syed, 2015). Because narratives are social and cultural, they are learned. Not only is the content of narratives largely learned but also the skills for narrating autobiographical narratives. Some

have argued that in industrialized cultures today, the ability to narrate autobiographical stories is a critical social skill similar to literacy (Fivush & Zaman, 2015). Being able to construct and maintain a coherent narrative identity is considered important for people's well-being. Thus, having 'narrative competency', that is, the ability to tell a story using culturally available narratives, may be an important skill for a healthy life. Overall, the effect of telling stories about past events is considered positive for people's mental health, for their relationships, and for society at large (McLean, 2015).

### Storytelling and well-being in the context of trauma and risks

Storytelling is a powerful tool for self-development and self-understanding. However, differences in personality traits and contextual factors might impact people's willingness or ability to reason about their past experiences or to rewrite their stories, or for such actions to be associated with increased well-being. Sometimes an experience is too 'raw' to be told or rewritten, especially while the person is still in the midst of the challenging experience (McLean, 2015). Reasoning about certain experiences does not increase well-being and might even hinder it. Indeed, some research suggests that people who suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder often do not benefit from autobiographical reasoning about traumatic experiences (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007; McLean & Mansfield, 2010). Research on at-risk youth found that some individuals on a positive life track after having had a particularly challenging childhood did not talk about the changes in their life by linking them to past experiences. Instead, how they had changed was emphasized through their positive behaviour and statements about their current self (McLean & Mansfield, 2010). The researchers explain that 'if one has few positive experiences to select for inclusion in one's life story, then the only option might be to develop a narrative that avoids details in favour of broad themes' (McLean & Mansfield, 2010, p. 91). The problem is not so much a person's lack of ability to reason but that the experiences themselves 'leave the person with no "productive" option for a reasoned narrative' (McLean & Mansfield, 2010, pp.



91-92). They describe this as a possibly good strategy for a 'path to resilience', whereby reasoning about the past is less productive than relegating past events to a 'past self' and focusing on 'hardly moving on'. These findings resonate with the narrative therapy approach that emphasizes externalizing problems and helping people to develop stories that reflect the values and the experiences of themselves, their relationships and their commitments that support their preferred ways of being. In this view, including difficult experiences might be neither necessary nor beneficial, because other narratives are more significant in developing a positive life story. When working with individuals and groups who may not benefit from talking about the self through the 'big' life stories, such as turning points and self-defining memories, a possible alternative is focusing on 'small stories', those told in conversation. Small stories do not involve extensive reasoning, but they can still be powerful in communicating one's identity, for instance through anecdotes that express one's values (Pasupathi, 2015) or through the performance of a funny story that shows one's humorous personality (McLean & Mansfield, 2010).

### **The cultural influence of master narratives**

Understanding the relationship between identity and narratives in a broader social context is especially important when working with people who are culturally and socially marginalized and excluded. All societies have master narratives, the 'culturally shared stories that communicate what the standards and expectations are for being part of a community' (McLean, 2015, p. 31). Master narratives play an important societal role for communicating the standards and expectations for belonging to a community and to social categories such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality. One master narrative that is commonly found in capitalist societies is the narrative about progress and growth. This narrative influences many aspects of society from economy and politics to how people understand their own personal development, family life, and career trajectory. Experiences of 'set-backs' or lack of

growth are therefore seen as negative and as signs of failure. While master narratives can create social cohesion, their normative standards also contribute to marginalization and exclusion of those who do not meet their definitions of what an appropriate or good life is. Those who deviate from master narratives often experience negative consequences such as rejection, prejudice, and exclusion. Resisting master narratives by actively creating alternative narrative constructions is a challenging process for individuals. People who are negatively affected by master narratives might also internalize those narratives, resulting in negative feelings such as shame or taking personal blame for personal problems or failures that are connected to systemic inequalities or the oppression of others (Crocker & Major, 1989). An example of this is a heterosexual couple who, after 25 years of marriage, experienced relationship problems when one of the partners became ill and immobile, resulting in his inability to help out with many household tasks (Combs & Freedman, 2012). The couple's new struggle to equally contribute to household tasks led to fights and bad feelings. Once they became aware that their frustration stemmed from their inability to live up to the master narrative of a (gender) equal relationship, a narrative that they had internalized and that was no longer working for them, they found alternative ways to define what a good relationship meant to them. Becoming aware of how societal master narratives disadvantage people is an important step in finding opportunities for positive identity development. Many people are aware of these structures, and awareness-raising and various forms of active resistance against oppressive master narratives is common among people who belong to societally (and narratively) disadvantaged groups such as migrants, refugees, homeless people, welfare receivers, and queer people. For example, the queer movement (involving people who resist conforming to normative gender and sexual identities) has actively inverted the negative label 'queer' to embrace queerness as a positive and acceptable form of being in the world. Similarly, a movement of people with disabilities has inverted the label 'crip' (Butler, 2011).

## Master narratives, exclusion, and belonging

People in less powerful positions and who experience structural inequality often deviate from master narratives. They explain this experience through the loss of connection to others, such as feelings of alienation (McLean et al., 2017). Structural and social marginalization are closely linked: 'not fitting in with the master narrative is about a loss of power, as well as a loss of belonging. This suggests that the work of constructing an alternative narrative is not a solitary activity – one must find another group with which to belong' (McLean et al., 2017, p. 643). The experience of belonging to a larger group is important for identity development. Studies have found that people resolve experiences of deviating from master narratives through stories of finding a group to belong to, thus an alternative story of belonging (McLean et al., 2017). People also create alternative narratives through redemption narratives, turning their negative experiences into a story of growth and resolution, and through generativity, stories of giving back to people who have had similar experiences of marginality and exclusion. In general, deviating from master narratives is rare, as the majority of people experience their lives according to the cultural narrative 'scripts'. But research shows that for those who do deviate, a lot more 'identity work' in the form of autobiographical reasoning, justification, and elaboration is required in order to create alternative narratives that can create a positive sense of self. Individuals' resistance to master narratives is important for narrating positive and resilient identities. The construction of alternative narratives is a social process: alternative narratives are developed and maintained with others, and they are essentially about finding a group to belong to. It can be a serious strain on people's identity to experience a lack of belonging to a group or the tensions of navigating between several groups. For people who experience multiple identities, stories can be useful to help bridge those identities and rewrite stories of who they are and where they belong. On the individual level, creating alternative narratives about social belonging might be more important than developing alternative narratives to challenge the status quo. When the construction of an alternative narrative supports one's positive identity development, resist-

ance against the master narrative can be considered 'an agentic act that empowers individuals' (McLean et al., 2017, p. 646).

## Cultural context and cultural differences

The cultural specificity of narratives also means that certain narratives and narrative styles are more dominant and accepted than others. For example, in the western American context, redemption narratives are a widespread master narrative used to explain difficult experiences through stories that turn from bad to good. Because redemption narratives are so highly valued, the ability to successfully narrate one's experiences into stories that follow these narrative scripts is important for individuals to gain social acceptance. When one's experiences fit well into the 'narrative scripts', one can make meaning of the experience and incorporate it into one's narrative identity. On the other hand, people whose experiences do not fit into the accepted narratives might experience more struggles with their narrative identity. One result can be the feeling of not fitting in, but one can also experience being silenced because the narrative style is not accepted. For example, the narrative styles used by some groups in society might not be accepted as legitimate ways of sharing stories. Because stories and identities are so connected, we can view narrative styles as part of the identity of people or groups. Silencing a person's story or not accepting parts of their story therefore also means silencing someone's sense of self (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007).

The relevance of creating a coherent life story can differ between cultural contexts. Most academic work on the topic of narrative research has been done in the Western-American context, but some studies compare these findings with the role of narrative identity in other cultures. For example, whereas the Western-American goal of narrative identity is to create a continuous sense of self and an autonomous self, researchers have found that narrative practices in the Chinese context help to 'develop connectedness with others and adherence to moral guidelines' (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007, p. 272).

Different cultures have their own cultural master narratives that are useful and meaningful within the values, beliefs, and goals of that culture (McLean & Syed, 2015). Therefore, story structures that are helpful for dealing with personal difficulties and tragedies likely differ based on the cultural context. For example, narratives about continuity and personal growth may be more salient in the personal narratives of individuals in some cultures, such as the Western-American culture, whereas in other cultures, narrative identities may be built on stories about one's place in society and family relations. The star of people's life stories in western countries is the individual telling the story, whereas in many East Asian cultures, memories are more socially oriented and people's life stories centre around collective experiences (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020). The cultural context can also determine the degree to which discontinuity and inconsistency in people's life stories are socially accepted or not. Research suggests that because western cultures are less open to discontinuities and fragmentation in personal life stories, people constantly work on their identities to make them coherent (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Essentially this means that autobiographical reasoning and the 'identity problem' might be a 'western problem', and cautiousness must be shown in transferring these theories to understanding narrative identity in other cultural contexts. It is also important to keep in mind that we have emphasized these cultural differences as illustrations. In reality, culturally different narratives are not inherently oppositional, and within these wide-sweeping notions of 'western' or 'Asian' cultures, there are differences and local varieties. Another relevant concept is Ubuntu in the South African context. The phrases 'being self through others' and 'I am because of who we all are' emphasize that the group affects individuals' well-being (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). In practice, there appears to be a scale that moves from individual approaches to group approaches with all kinds of combinations in-between.

## Conclusion

Life stories and storytelling can affect narrative identity development, which consists of individual and relational approaches as well as imagined and material elements. These items can be linked with notions of well-being, but also with trauma and risks. All of these issues are in flux, which shows that identities can and do change. Identity formation is a co-authored process in which, for example, a family and cultural context determine whether one belongs or not. In other words, it refers to mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

In general, change is possible through narrating positive identities, through changing negative experiences into a story of growth and resolution. Redemption narratives, common in western cultures, are also used to explain difficult experiences through stories that turn bad into good. However, autobiographical reasoning and identity problems might be most prominent in western cultures. In other cultures and societies, group-oriented approaches may be more effective than individual psychological approaches.

Some narratives can have a negative impact on vulnerability, which in turn causes shame and blame that can lead to negative feelings. However, awareness-raising can play an important role in getting rid of negative-oriented internalized stories. Alternative narratives can be developed by organizing active resistance against oppressive master narratives. They can also be helpful for people whose stories have been silenced, that is, when all or part of their story has not been accepted, which can result in a silencing of their sense of self.

Externalizing problems and supporting the development of stories that reflect values can help in improving one's own situation. To help excluded people living marginalized circumstances, it is important to understand the relationship between identity and narratives in a broader social context. Therefore, attention must be given to issues such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality.



5





## The transformative potential of storytelling for learning, personal development, empowerment, and well-being

Storytelling presents interesting opportunities for increasing people's well-being and empowerment. For marginalized individuals and groups in vulnerable circumstances, storytelling can be important for creating a context in which people can experience being heard and they can (re)claim their voice through sharing their stories. In this chapter, we explore the importance of sharing life stories and look at how sharing fictional stories can help individuals learn and can contribute to their empowerment and well-being.

### Co-creating knowledge and the sharing of life stories

The transformative dynamic of the self story lies in the profoundly empowering recognition that one is not only the main character but also the author of that story (Rossiter, 2002).

The way we see the world is influenced by a variety of elements, from our personal experiences, upbringing and family relationships to the wider cultural and historical context that we learn through education, religion, media, discourse, and our engagement with the world. When we tell about our personal experiences, for example, we use 'words and stories to clarify "the perspective or lens one uses to look out at the world"' (Grassley & Nelms, 2009, p. 2449). This is conceptualized as 'contextual grounding'. We engage in practices of contextual grounding to understand the world and our place in it. Our contextual grounding also influences our choices and behaviour. When sharing stories, we place our experiences within this contextual grounding.

However, sometimes our experiences challenge that grounding or do not conform to it. In these cases, telling and sharing stories can help to validate and affirm people's experiences and realities. For example, researchers have found that women who breastfed their children in a culture or environment where breastfeeding was unusual created stories that validated and affirmed their positive experiences with breastfeeding (Grassley & Nelms, 2009). Sharing their stories with other women in a similar position presented an opportunity for them to release emotions that they had little opportunity to express in their daily lives. By sharing their experiences regarding cultural, family, and healthcare expectations towards breastfeeding, they were able to examine them in the broader context of social structures and cultural narratives, which helped to clarify existing barriers, limits, and lack of support for their personal efforts.

The opportunity to develop one's own voice through storytelling has a significant meaning (Palacios et al., 2014). This is especially the case for those who have experienced having their personal narrative and identity defined by others in ways that are incoherent and destructive for the self-conception of that individual or group of individuals. For example, in emancipatory movements such as the feminist movement and black liberation movements, reclaiming one's own voice has involved bringing to the fore previously 'hidden' stories and narratives of people from those groups. By hidden, we mean stories that have not been included or accepted in the wider cultural narratives. However, other people with similar backgrounds and experiences can relate to and identify with such stories. These stories can also create a framework for explaining experience and understanding identity. Sharing personal and alternative stories of breastfeeding had emancipatory effects for the women in our earlier example because they were able to confront stereotypes and resist dominant narratives, create empowering strategies, and develop their own voice. All of this can play an important role for maintaining a sense of well-being. While many external factors and personal relations impact how one's life unfolds, being the narrator of one's life story can be experienced as a powerful act because it can mean taking charge of how events and ex-

periences are framed and viewing oneself as an agent in one's own life and life story. Storytelling and listening can also have emancipatory effects on a wider group level by strengthening connections and community, creating bonds, and expanding the knowledge of the social group as a whole.

### The significance of listeners

Simply having someone to listen to one's experiences or stories can mean a great deal. Listeners play an important role in creating our sense of self, and having a listener to share experiences with can positively impact our personal narratives and emotional well-being. Research has found that listeners can have positive effects on making memories into stories. When an experience is disclosed to a listener, people tend to place the experiences and events more firmly in the past, creating a distance between the event and the present time and present self. This distance is thought to reduce emotional distress related to negative experiences. Conversations are ongoing negotiations between storytellers and listeners about which stories are allowed to be told (Pasupathi & Billitteri, 2015). During a conversation, speakers initiate stories that may not be accepted into the conversation by the listener. There are many potential reasons for this. One storyteller on this project explains that in her experience, certain stories told by marginalized people are not accepted by listeners such as their social workers or case workers, because the stories do not 'fit in'. This could be because the manner in which people talk about their experiences and 'problems' might not necessarily be understood by or seen as fitting in the professionalized and bureaucratic discourse of social workers. Minority groups are more likely to experience that their stories are not allowed to be told or are not accepted by their listeners because, as we discussed previously, majority groups hold the power over defining knowledge and how knowledge should be told. Cultural differences in how to talk about and approach issues such as mental health are also likely to lead to certain stories not 'fitting in' or not being allowed by listeners from another cultural background who are not aware of these differences.

One factor that plays a role in the choice to share or not share a story is concern about how the listener may react. What level of support, if any, can be anticipated? This can determine not only whether the story is told but also how and how much of it is told. For example, when sharing an experience of racism, the narrator might choose to frame the story differently to her white friends than to her Latina girlfriends who can recognize and validate the experience. Sometimes, someone simply does not have access to a listener at all. Not having a listener can be detrimental to people's well-being because being able to share one's experiences through stories is so important for creating coherent stories and meaningful explanations about the past. People who experience silencing of their experiences, either by other individuals or by the culture at large, struggle to integrate their experiences into their identity through a coherent story, which could potentially lead to identity confusion and fragmentation (Fivush, 2010). Research suggests that people are more likely to share difficult or traumatic experiences with people who have had similar experiences and not disclose those same experiences with people who are close to them, such as their spouse, who have not had such experiences. When individuals have a community of listeners who are both able and willing to hear and validate their experiences, they are able to create more coherent narratives. This is connected to higher physical and psychological well-being (Fivush, 2010). Research on narrative therapy suggests that working with narratives in a group, as opposed to one-on-one, can be helpful because linking people trying to overcome particular kinds of marginalization together gives them the experience that they are not alone in their struggles. However, it is important to note that disclosing traumatic experiences with similarly trauma-exposed listeners has been shown to pose a risk for people with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Pasupathi & Billitteri, 2015). While creating safe spaces and communities in which only people with similar experiences can share and listen to each other's stories is both relevant and possibly very positive, there are also potential risks involved that must be considered when creating such groups, and facilitators must evaluate which support mechanisms should be put in place.

## Reauthoring stories

The social and psychological approaches that see identity and narrative as closely related have created an interest in the growing use of narrative therapy (Etchison & Kleist, 2000; Combs & Freedman, 2012). Two highly relevant insights from narrative therapy are the view on problems as separate from people and the development of preferred stories. Narrative therapy focuses on how the problems of individuals are situated in broader social, cultural, and political contexts. Problem stories are people's stories about their problems. These stories are 'problems' in that they are 'thin stories' that focus on only a small proportion of people's many life experiences. The meanings that people can draw from these stories are limited and are often not what people want for their lives. Assisting people to reframe and re-author their stories about the problem can help them separate the problem from the people (e.g., themselves or other relations). Once people are able to recognize that the problem is separate from themselves, they become more aware of how broader discourses and power play a part in that problem. This can be transformative because it provides people with a more critical and empowered perspective on their lives and because it opens up a space for people to choose to develop alternative narratives. People's problems are not necessarily resolved or removed through this process, but alternative narratives can help them find new ways of responding to their problems. Once a problem is externalized, it changes from being a defining story to being just one strand of a multi-stranded story, which can help make it feel less significant. The externalization of problems is also important for supporting social justice because it guards against the marginalization that can occur when people's identities are labelled as problematic or pathological.

In narrative therapy, stories about problems can also be approached by looking for 'what is absent but implicit'. Because we make meaning of our experiences in relation to other experiences, stories about problems are often made in contrast to other experiences that are preferred and treasured (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1041). A personal story about an experience of racism or

injustice might be made with the contrasting background of a vision or conception of a just society. Yet this background might not even be mentioned in the story but only implied: it is absent but implicit. A careful listener's questions about what is implied can lead to a conversation in which the teller can re-author their stories of what they value, what that value means to their identity, and how their achievements, small and large, fit with that value (Combs & Freedman, 2012, pp. 1041–1042). Another method to support people in re-authoring their stories is by looking for stories of personal agency in disempowering circumstances. Finding stories about how people actively responded, even in extremely small ways, to injustices can provide openings to preferred stories because it highlights their acts of resistance and indicates something important about them. Bringing forth and developing these stories of personal agency helps people to avoid being defined by unjust experiences and circumstances. A final way to help people re-author their stories is by looking for their preferred stories. Preferred stories tell something important about the person's values, and compared to problem stories, preferred stories are 'thick' in that they are 'rich, meaningful, multi-stranded stories of people's lives' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1037). Narrative therapy thus aims to enrich people's life stories and strengthen their identity by bringing forth and supporting the development of their preferred stories.

Working with narrative therapy in groups can provide ways to tell, retell, and re-author stories collaboratively. This may be especially efficient because of the effects it has on several participants throughout one session. An example of a practical approach to the sharing of stories in a group is an activity of telling and retelling one participant's story (Law, 2021). This 'definitional ceremony' takes place through several steps, beginning with the storyteller relating their story to a group of others acting as outsider witnesses. Then one of the outsider witnesses retells the first telling, and another outsider witness retells the second retelling, and so on. Through the multiple retellings, alternative themes become confirmed, richer, and 'thickened'. In addition, the retellings amplify the empowerment that the storyteller experiences in a way that otherwise may not have been available. Because of the collabora-

tive nature of this storytelling exercise, all the participants can be 'moved' and can benefit from participation, not only the initial storyteller. From working with this technique, Law argues that it is especially powerful for providing social acknowledgement to the self-identity of storytellers (Law, 2021).

A key benefit of approaching problems from the narrative perspective is that it is much simpler to support people in changing their relationships with their problems than it is to change people's basic nature or to help them adjust to living with deficits (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Moreover, as we explored previously, the stories we tell about ourselves become part of our identity and self-conception. Once people are able to bring forth and develop preferred stories, these stories become more deeply rooted in their past. Narrative therapy can therefore play a role in supporting people to envision and plan their future.

## Looking beyond autobiographical storytelling

In the previous sections, we explored how the telling and sharing of people's life stories has several emancipatory functions, which are related to at least three elements: sharing and co-creating of knowledge; processing of and dealing with emotions; and creating and sustaining relations. Sharing stories and experiences can lead to empowerment through knowledge. Sharing personal knowledge leads to sharing resources and expanding people's knowledge and perspectives, and it is a recognition that people are experts of their own experiences. Shared emotional experiences of empathy, tears, and laughter can have 'cathartic' effects. Finally, sharing stories brings people closer, creating bonds (Grassley & Nelms, 2009, p. 2451). Beyond the immediate personal emancipatory functions of storytelling, sharing stories with other groups has a potential for initiating 'transformative dialogue', for instance with health-care professionals, social workers or policy makers, by illuminating social structures that influence people's experiences and that need to be changed (Grassley & Nelms, 2009, pp. 2452–2453). But storytelling does not have to be autobiographical to benefit a person's development. As highlighted in

the previous section, in certain cases, autobiographical reasoning is not always beneficial or even necessary for developing a positive identity and life story (Pasupathi, 2015; McLean & Mansfield, 2011). Research on the benefits of various non-autobiographical narrative techniques has found that telling a story about one's own experiences from a third-person perspective can be beneficial because the teller becomes an observer of their own story (Terry & Horton, 2008). This change of perspective can provide them with a broader overview of the event. The distance created through telling the story from a third-person perspective also helps the teller to remove themselves, to a certain extent, from the strong emotional feelings that tend to arise when telling a story in a first-person perspective. Since stories and storytelling are embodied processes, telling or listening to stories always brings up personal memories, evoking emotions and visceral reactions (Pasupathi, 2015). Thus, creating distance from one's own experience by telling the story as someone 'looking in' is an efficient way to use storytelling to deal with personal emotions and thoughts. Another storytelling technique that may be able to assist in positive identity development is to ask people to tell stories about imagined characters and imagined events that are based on, but not identical to, their personal experiences and difficulties. This brings us back into the realm of fiction, which is our focus for the remainder of this chapter.

### **Fictional stories: Shifting our perspectives for learning, self-development, and change**

Fiction enormously enhances our creativity. It offers us incentives for and practice in thinking beyond the here and now, so that we can use the whole of possibility space to take new vantage points on actuality and on ways in which it might be transformed (Boyd, 2009, p. 197).

Fictional stories have potential for enhancing well-being and empowerment because they allow us to explore other worlds and people through a story, which ignites us to engage in self-reflection and opens up possibilities to improve our social skills and develop our own identities. Watching and read-



ing fictional stories we find meaningful gives us experiences of appreciation, and over time, they can enhance our well-being because 'they help us think through what we value and what we want' (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020, p. 44).

Psychologists have suggested that fiction might operate as the mind's flight simulator (Djikic & Oatley, 2014) in the sense that readers learn and acquire social expertise through reading fiction, as future pilots train their skills in flight simulators. A major function of fiction is that it provides scenarios and models that can be used when planning actions and making decisions (Boyd, 2009). A central reason that fiction can be a simulator for social learning, empathy, and improved understanding of other people is because the typical subject of fiction is what psychologists call theory-of-mind. Theory-of-mind is 'the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others, and to understand that others can have intentions and desires that are different from one's own' (Djikic & Oatley, 2014, p. 499). Since fictional stories tend to be an exploration of the mental and emotional states of characters and how they interact with themselves and the world, they serve as a learning ground to practice and develop empathy and social skills. Dill-Shackleford and Vinney (2020) explain that 'running a story simulation in our minds enables us to explore our emotions, mentally rehearse possible actions, consider our values, engage in social interactions, and access many other parts of the human experience that we might not otherwise have access to in our everyday lives' (p. 24). Even fictional stories that seem quite far away from everyday experience, such as stories with imaginary creatures and supernatural elements, can contribute to learning through simulation. According to Boyd (2009), this is because the power of fictional narratives is not that they depict real life realistically but that they compel us to reflect upon and develop our own thinking about reality.

Scholars have suggested two mechanisms that encourage the processes of self-reflection and self-development through stories: transportation and identification. When listening to a story, we can become metaphorically

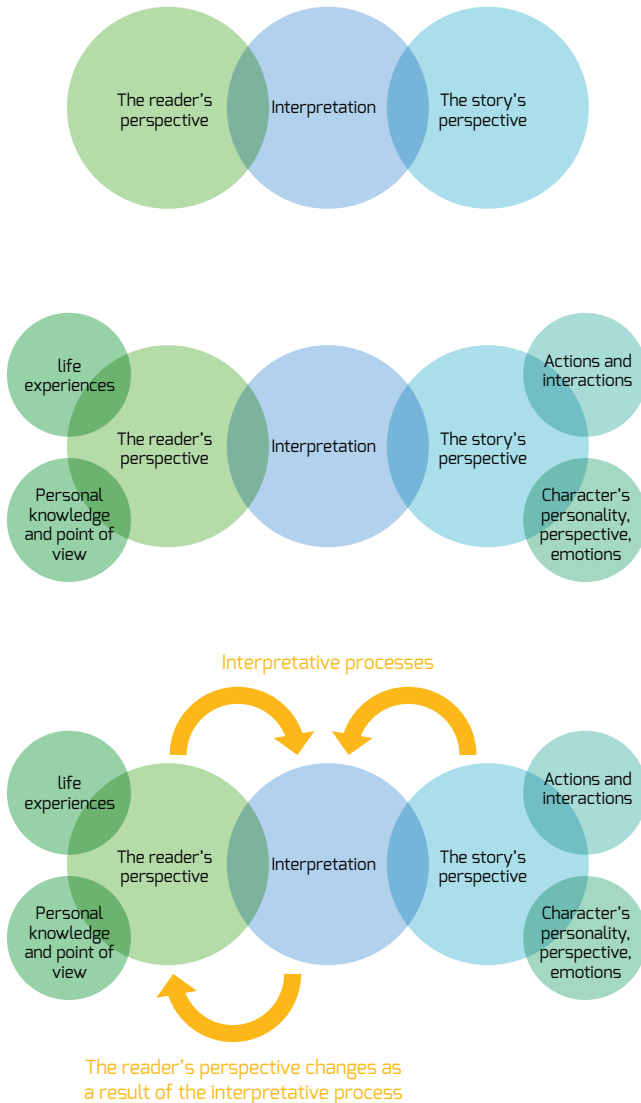
transported into other times and spaces. This loosens our connections to ourselves and our current surroundings in the moment. It is almost as if the opening words of most fairy tales, 'Once upon a time...', shift our minds to another place. Through our imagination, we envisage ourselves being where the story is unfolding, and at times, we forget about the everyday. We become engaged with the characters of the story through what psychologists call identification. We recognize elements of ourselves in the characters, in their personalities, goals, and emotions. Through identification with characters, we can experience a 'dual empathy', whereby we both examine ourselves and 'become' someone else for a while (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020). In practice, dual empathy means that we experience feelings through the characters, such as joy, hurt, and regret, and develop feelings for the characters, such as disappointment and happiness. It is not the fictional characters who experience these emotions but the reader or listener who experiences them based on how they attach meaning and importance to characters and events in the story (Djikic & Oatley, 2009). Because of this 'dual empathy', we learn to understand both others, through their actions and emotions in various situations, and ourselves, through our reactions to and judgements of the characters' choices and feelings.

When we take on a character's perspective, we can explore new feelings, new experiences, and how it might feel to be someone else. Identification with a character can trigger a temporary change of perspective that leads listeners to increasingly lose their sense of self-awareness due to their emotional and cognitive connection with the character. In a way, they 'forget themselves' for a moment. To better understand how this change of perspective happens in practice, we can view stories in terms of three perspectives: the story's perspective, the reader's perspective, and the intersection where those two perspectives meet (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020).

It is at this intersection that interpretation happens. Here, connections are made between elements and cues in the story and the individual points of view and life experiences of the reader or listener. This makes the story

meaningful to each individual reader. The reader's change of perspective is not a matter of a story persuading them to see otherwise; instead, it is a result of the interpretative process that happens when a story prompts the reader to involve themselves in the story. Because fiction invites us to explore the world through the perspectives of others, it 'cultivates our sympathetic imagination' (Boyd, 2009, p. 195) and encourages the development of empathy and a moral sense.

Figure 2. The reader's perspective elaborated



Memory also has a central role in the process of self-development and change. When we listen to or read a fictional story, personal memories might come to the surface, which allows us to explore ourselves. We can re-evaluate and explore the various meanings of memories and ideas about ourselves in light of the story being told, giving us new angles and perspectives to approach our specific memories from. Research has found that adolescents actively use fictional stories to learn, grow, and reach their future goals as a complement to the local knowledge they gain from their social environment (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020). For example, films with a coming-of-age story can help adolescents to navigate their own coming-of-age experiences and emotions, to 'grapple and negotiate with the freedoms and constraints of this time in their lives' (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020, p. 160). These stories can help adolescents learn about strategies for dealing with challenges they share with the character of the story, such as understanding and accepting their gender and sexual identity.

Imagination is a key component to the transformative potential of fictional storytelling. With the help of our imagination, transportation into and identification with the world of the story becomes possible and we can learn from the characters' story and journey. Over time, what we learn from characters can be used in our real lives and can help to form who we become (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020). Fictional stories are therefore important elements of the continuous and dynamic narrative construction of the self (narrative identity). They also possibly play a positive role in self-development and learning of social and cognitive skills.

### **Fairy tales, wonder, and transformation**

Fairy tales are commonly used by storytellers working with groups in vulnerable circumstances. What is it about fairy tales that attracts listeners of all ages and across societies? Fairy tales use magic and enchantment to make us wonder 'why', 'what if' and 'what could be' in the real world. Many cultures

throughout the world have a rich history of telling fairy tales. In Europe, the socio-historical development of the fairy tale genre includes two types of tales: oral wonder tales and literary fairy tales. Oral wonder tales are based in oral traditions and are a hybrid formation of chronicle, myth, legend, anecdote, and other oral forms of storytelling that were popular among the common people in society (Zipes, 2000). Literary fairy tales came later and were advanced appropriations of oral wonder tales and other literary materials by writers in the educated and upper classes. The oral wonder tales related to the realities of people's lives in a time when the majority of people experienced poverty, which is why 'lack' and 'absence' are central themes in traditional fairy tales (Tatar, 2014). The fairy tale is a genre that has been in constant motion. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a canon of classical fairy tales had developed, with stories such as 'Cinderella', 'Sleeping Beauty', 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'Snow White', 'Rumpelstiltskin', 'Rapunzel', 'Puss in Boots', 'The Princess and the Pea' and 'Aladdin and the Lamp'. These stories have served as reference points for the standardized structure, motifs, and topoi (basic theme/concept) of fairy tales for readers young and old throughout the western world (Zipes, 2000). Since the 1960s, a great deal of experimentation and adaptation of fairy tales has taken place, from Disney's film adaptations to fairy tale writers' fascination with counter-cultural movements such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* saga and C. S. Lewis's tales of Narnia (Zipes, 2000). Contemporary fairy tales include the proliferation of tales that reinvent classic fairy tales, as well as a noteworthy strand of feminist fairy tales that question gender roles and sexuality by writers such as Jane Yolen, known for *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink*, and Angela Carter, who wrote *A Company of Wolves*, a reinvention of the classic tale of Little Red Riding Hood. While the utopian transformation and people's desire for a better life remains a major appeal of contemporary fairy tales, most of them 'have a greater awareness of the complexities of sexuality and gender roles and have sought to explore traditional fairy tales with a social consciousness and awareness in keeping with and being critical of our changing times' (Zipes, 2000, p. 103).<sup>2</sup>

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2 See this article for references to many different kinds of contemporary fairy tales.

We take pleasure in listening to fairy tales and other folktales because the sense of wonder fulfils our need to 'understand life as it is and to dream of life as it ought to be' (Simonsen, 1998, p. 213). Researchers of folklore have argued that the storytelling of such tales functions to help people to collectively come to terms with 'the facts of life and their inherent contradictions' (Simonsen, 1998, p. 210). Because of the direct relationship between oral wonder tales and fairy tales, they both largely depend on the same story conventions (Zipes, 2000). According to Jack Zipes (2000), one constant structure and theme of the wonder tale that was passed on to fairy tales is transformation. Both characters and objects in the story are seen to transform and change, most often to the benefit of the protagonist's social status. The inducement of wonder and the possibility of wondrous change is what distinguishes wonder stories and fairy tales from other stories such as legends, fables, and myths. Wondrous transformation and change are the keys to survival for most heroes, and for the tellers and listeners of stories, they communicate both a hope for change and the value of taking advantage of unexpected opportunities in life (Zipes, 2000). Zipes explains that wondrous change and how the protagonist reacts to wondrous occurrences both affect our imaginations:

[They] nurture the imagination with alternative possibilities of life at 'home', from which the protagonist is often banished to find his or her 'true' home. This pursuit of home accounts for the utopian spirit of the tales, for the miraculous transformation does not only involve the transformation of the protagonist but also the realization of a more ideal setting in which the hero/heroine can fulfil his or her potential. In fairy tales home is always a transformed home opening the way to a different future than the hero or heroine had anticipated (Zipes, 2000, p. xix).

The three elements of wonder, transformation, and embracing unexpected opportunities are central to exploring how fairy tales can help people view challenges and changes in their own lives. While there is a strong reason to

believe that fairy tales can support people's own life stories, Zipes cautions us that '[the] focus on wonder in the oral folktale does not mean that all wonder tales, and later the fairy tales, served and serve a liberating purpose, though they tend to conserve a utopian spirit. Nor were they subversive, though there are strong hints that the narrators favoured the oppressed protagonists' (Zipes, 2021, p. xix). Thus, fairy tales might not be liberating or subversive in themselves; it is instead up to us to determine how to make use of them for that purpose. According to Tatar (2014), the power of fairy tales is that they get conversations going. They 'oblige us to react, to take positions and make judgements, enabling us to work through cultural contradictions' (Tatar, 2014, p. 3).

Symbols are central in telling fairy tales, and the multiple meanings of symbols can have many kinds of personal, emotional, and cultural associations in the minds of listeners. This provides space for interpretation and the sharing of multiple interpretations of the meanings of stories, the understanding of problems, the intentions of characters, and the structures of power that the characters find themselves in. Fairy tales are therefore not only enjoyable stories to tell and listen to, but their multiple meanings also make for conversation starters about issues and experiences that are important to us. Some scholars of literature have argued that because fairy tales are characterized by 'endless variation and adaptability', they are especially suitable for reinvention (Duggan, Haase & Callow, 2016). We often recognize a fairy tale when we hear one; their paradigmatic structure and 'easily identifiable characters who are associated with particular assignments and settings' (Zipes, 2000, p. xvii) makes them readily recognizable. The paradigmatic structure is helpful for both tellers and listeners to easily remember and retell the stories, and it makes it easy for tellers to change stories to fit their own experiences and desires (Zipes, 2000).

Folklore theorist Simonsen argues that because fairy tales and other folklore tend to be built upon the same narrative patterns and emotions and ideas, what is interesting is how these 'same few basic emotions and ideas can gen-

erate an infinite number of concrete pictures and stories' (Simonsen, 1998, p. 214). The same fairy tale often exists in many different versions. For example, different versions of the story of Cinderella can be found in (at least) Greek, Egyptian, and Baltic regions. While the symbols, characters, and events might differ slightly in the stories that exist across various geographical and cultural locations, the underlying themes, morals, and meanings tend to be the same (Kaplanoglou, 2016). This is because storytellers do not simply adapt stories; they transform them through actively remodelling the story and the symbols of the story to tell their message to audiences of specific contexts and cultures. The changeability of fairy tales can be described as similar to a kaleidoscope: 'one simple twist, and something completely new, yet deeply familiar, emerges' (Tatar, 2014, p. 1). The easily available changeability of fairy tales makes them an ideal genre to be used by a diversity of individuals and groups across time and space. For example, certain elements or endings of fairy tales can be changed to suit the goal of the storyteller. The storyteller can choose whether the prize should be marriage or whether the stepmother plays the role of the evil one. Changing a story's elements alters some, but not all, of the story's meanings, and it can allow for more empowering endings or conversations about what our goals should be.

### **Characteristics of fictional stories that can encourage transformation**

Fictional stories have been described as encouraging transformative processes of reflection in their readers (Just, 2019). The transformation a reader might experience from reading fiction is slow and gradual. Research suggests that the transformation mostly stems from the individual's own processes of reflection and emotional reactions to the story rather than the story convincing the individual to change. Because the processes of reflection and meaning-making are central to transformative change, open-ended stories that do not provide readers with ready-made answers are the best at encouraging change. We can also distinguish between emotional experiences that are 'prescribed' by the writer, such as in thrillers and horror stories, and



emotions experienced through reading that are not prescribed by the storyteller but are a result of the reader's own interpretations of the story (Djikic & Oatley, 2014). It is the non-prescribed and individual emotional experiences that are related to personality change and development. These emotional experiences are connected to the meaning-making process of the individual reader, who attaches different strengths and importance to the characters and events of the story. Many stories from different fictional genres are useful for encouraging change. Fairy tales, folktales, and legends, with their many symbols and symbolic meanings, tend to be good stories for allowing readers to draw their own conclusions based on their own perspectives and experiences. Literary or artistic fiction, as opposed to popular fiction, is considered more likely to encourage self-change. This is because popular fiction often has comparably clear plots and characters, which asks for a more passive reader that accepts the provided meanings. Literary fictions, on the other hand, have complex narrative devices, for instance an unreliable narrator, pauses in the plot or narrative changes in characters' perspectives. This gives the reader the opportunity to engage with several or changing perspectives (Just, 2019). These stories also ask their readers to fill narrative gaps by searching for and constructing possible meanings themselves. Readers of literary fiction need to involve themselves more in the meaning-making process of the story because, as readers, they are invited to contribute their own perspectives (Castano, Martingano & Perconti, 2020). The distinction between popular and literary fiction is a generalized one. The most important insight from this distinction is that it helps to identify fictional stories that can support transformation and positive change in individuals.

### **Safe spaces for taking risks**

Because fictional stories provide us with freedom to explore our personal emotions and memories, they can contribute to personal growth in several ways. Researchers have found that reading fiction or watching fictional television shows and films makes our autobiographical memories surface at a much higher rate than in our everyday lives; in addition, they found that

our emotional reactions to fictional stories are 'as spontaneous and unfiltered as they would be in a real-life social situation' (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020, p. 26). Fictional stories therefore provide us with opportunities to make sense of our emotions and memories in the context of a story and away from the real-life stress and challenges present in our daily lives. Thus, when we explore our personal emotions and memories through stories, we do so without the anxiety that might otherwise come up when experiencing and exploring these same emotions in our daily lives. Fictional stories provide a space of safety because we 'know that the emotions and events we encounter in fiction won't affect our real lives once the story is over so we don't feel the need to protect ourselves from them' (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020, p. 27). The 'distancing-embracing model' explains how the distance between the suffering depicted in art and our own emotional reaction to it puts us in a position of power and control in which we can safely enjoy the experience of negative emotions (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020). We can therefore understand fiction as creating spaces in which negative emotions and memories, which are otherwise too threatening to be explored in the context of one's own life and experience, can be thought through, processed, and challenged. By not causing that anxiety that overwhelms us and results in the suppression of emotions and memories, even negatively down-spiralling the situation, fictional and artistic stories provide a comfortable and empowering distance from which difficulties can safely surface and real-life issues can be dealt with more effectively.

Another crucial element in fictional stories that helps people to learn and develop is the element of play. According to Boyd (2009), our fascination for fictional stories lies in the element of pretend play. For children, pretend play (which involves both imagination and stories) has an important role in grasping reality, acting out different behaviours and situations and transgressing the boundaries of the normal. Children learn about and act upon the world through pretend play by re-enacting stories about their social environment that they are not yet capable of telling in complete stories. Yet, as adults who master language and have a good conception of the social world around us,

we are still fascinated by fictional stories. From an evolutionary perspective, the element of play draws us to fictional stories because it allows us to 'extend and refine key cognitive competencies' (Boyd, 2009, p. 190) in the safety of our imaginations. Through stories we can expose ourselves to great risks and develop skills that could be dangerous to learn in real life, such as learning the problem-solving strategies 'and emotional resources needed to cope with inevitable setbacks, without subjecting ourselves to actual risk' (Boyd, 2009, p. 193). The element of play in fiction involves a decoupling of the real, which is central for creating such a 'safe' environment to explore and learn. The decoupling of the real is especially visible in stories that have elements of magic, enchantment, and symbolisms, such as mythical stories and fairy tales, in which we often find characters who are human-like but take on non-human forms such as animals, inanimate objects or imaginary creatures. While the non-human characters make the decoupling from the real explicit and put the story and its events at a safe distance from the reader, the human-like elements of these characters means that we still experience identification with the characters' feelings, motivations, and goals.

## Conclusion

This chapter explored different kinds of stories and storytelling methods. It also discussed the roles of listeners and tellers around the globe who interpret stories and co-create life stories in different ways. Storytelling enables people to distinguish problems from themselves, minimizing confrontations with personal narratives and identities. Storytelling in the third persons makes the story less personal, and the teller becomes a teller of their own story. Life stories can have emancipatory functions involving the sharing and co-creating of knowledge, processing and dealing with emotions, and creating and sustaining relations.

Fictional storytelling appears to offer routes for learning, personality change, and self-development through enhancing our imagination and creativity and offering strategies and simulations for navigating our social worlds and learn-

ing social skills. They help us to shift our perspectives to allow for increased empathy and understanding of how others think, feel, and view the world. In addition, they enable us to enter 'safe spaces' in which we can explore and process emotions without the presence of anxiety. This creates the possibility of thinking beyond the here and now and creates new vantage points and transformation.

Fairy tales can be useful in encouraging transformation because they are characterized by magic and enchantment that makes us wonder 'why', 'what if' and 'what could be' in the real world. Wonder, transformation, and embracing unexpected opportunities can often (though not always) help people deal with challenges and changes in their own lives. The strength of fairy tales is that they help continue the conversation. The structure of fairy tales helps tellers and listeners to not only remember and retell stories but also easily change the stories to fit their own experiences and desires.

However, a safe space is needed to enable change. When one feels safe, the possibilities for exploring personal emotions and memories can lead to personal growth. The distancing-embracing model creates distance between the suffering depicted in stories and one's emotional reaction to it. Such distance allows power and control to be employed in such a way that negative emotions can be experienced in a safe environment. Finally, stories can be characterized by an element of play that allows us to extend and refine cognitive competences within the safety of our imaginations.



6



## Social work and storytelling

This chapter looks at how storytelling can be a useful intervention tool for social workers. We will identify the types of situations that might benefit from storytelling as an intervention, focusing especially on narrative therapy and how practitioners who are not therapists can make use of its insights.

### Social work

Social work is a container concept that encompasses many theories and different ways of working that all aim to improve people's living conditions and well-being. Each approach can have specific characteristics that are determined by contextual factors. Our understanding of social work and its aims is outlined below:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (Parker & Crabtree, 2018).

Social workers are generally service oriented and responsive to clients' demands. Their work is expected to be underpinned by theoretical insights. 'A modern social work "theory" must therefore respond to the modern social construction of reality both by clients and by workers and their social environments; if it fails to do so, it will be unsuccessful' (Payne, 1997, p. 24).

Given the nature and aims of social work, we believe storytelling can be an appropriate intervention to help people facing vulnerable circumstances. This is because 'storytelling is a specific social practice in which humans engage and find meaningful' (McLean, 2015, p. 25). Social workers who use storytelling use elements of narrative therapy to improve their clients' condition. How they do this is described below.

## Narrative therapy

Carr (1998) provided an excellent overview of Michael White's narrative therapy, which includes the following tasks (quoted from Carr, 1998, p. 487):

- Adopt a collaborative co-authoring consultative position.
- Help clients view themselves as separate from their problems by externalizing the problem.
- Help clients pinpoint times in their lives when they were not oppressed by their problems by finding unique outcomes.
- Thicken clients' descriptions of these unique outcomes by using landscape of action and landscape of consciousness questions.
- Link unique outcomes to other events in the past and extend the story into the future to form an alternative and preferred self-narrative in which the self is viewed as more powerful than the problem.
- Invite significant members of the person's social network to witness this new self-narrative.
- Document new knowledge and practices which support the new self-narrative using literary means.
- Let others who are trapped by similar oppressive narratives benefit from their new knowledge through bringing-it-back practices.

The narrative therapist acts as a consultant to people who face problems at a personal and political level and need help to fight back against them. The assumption is that lives and identities are determined by three factors (quoted from Carr, 1998, p. 489):



The meaning people give to their experiences, or the stories they tell themselves about themselves.

- The language practices that people are recruited into along with the type of words they use to narrate their lives.
- The situations people occupy in social structures in which they participate and the power relations entailed by these.

White's narrative therapy requires that there is 'openness about the therapist's working context, intentions, values, and biases' (Carr, 1998, p. 490). In narrative therapy, the client's language is more important than the therapist's language. The therapist's assumption is 'that since social realities are constituted through language and organized through narratives, all therapeutic conversations aim to explore multiple constructions of reality rather than tracking down the facts which constitute a single truth' (Carr, 1998, p. 490).

### Table 1. Practices in Narrative Therapy

#### **Practice 1. Position collaboratively**

- Adopt a collaborative co-authoring consultative position.
- Be open about therapeutic context, intentions and values
- Privilege clients' language
- Question about multiple viewpoints, rather than the objective facts
- Privilege listening over questioning
- Be vigilant for opportunities to open up space for new liberating stories

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#### **Practice 2. Externalize the problem**

- Help clients see themselves as separate from their problems through externalizing the problem
- Join with clients in fighting the externalized problem

### **Practice 3. Excavate unique outcomes**

- Help clients pinpoint times in their lives when they were not oppressed by their problems by finding unique outcomes.
  - Help clients describe these preferred valued experiences.
- 

### **Practice 4. Thicken the new plot**

*Ask landscape of action and identity questions to thicken the description of the unique outcome.*

*Landscape of action questions focus on*

- Events
- Sequences
- Time
- Plot

*Landscape of consciousness focus on*

- Meaning
  - Effects
  - Evaluation
  - Justification
- 

### **Practice 5. Link to the past and extend to the future**

- Link the unique outcome to other past events
- Extend the story into the future
- Form an alternative and preferred self-narrative in which the self is viewed as more powerful than the problem

### **Practice 6. Invite outsider witness groups**

- Invite significant members of the person's social network to witness this new self-narrative. This is the outsider witness group

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### **Practice 7. Use re-membering practices and incorporation**

- Re-connect clients with internal representations of supportive and significant members of their families and networks

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### **Practice 8. Use literary means**

*Use literary means to document and celebrate new knowledge and practices.*

- Certificates and awards
- News releases
- Personal declarations and letters of reference

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### **Practice 9. Facilitate bringing-it-back practices**

- Invite clients to make a written account of new knowledge and practices for future clients with similar problems
- Arrange for new clients to meet with clients who have solved similar problems in therapy

*(Source: Carr, 1998, pp. 488–489)*

Having outlined the practices inherent within White's narrative therapy, we now detail how practitioners could use narratives as an effective intervention tool.

## Working with insights and tools from narrative therapy

### *The role of the storytelling therapist*

The role of the storytelling practitioner, be they a therapist, coach, social worker, or trained storyteller, is to facilitate and support the development of people's life stories in a way that recognizes the personal agency that each person has over their own life story and identity and to bring to the fore experiences and intentions that say something about what people treasure. Through storytelling, practitioners help people experience possibilities that are not apparent in their current problem stories. Without solving people's problems, practitioners help people to see themselves in life stories that offer different possibilities and directions than the narrow storylines they are 'stuck' in. Such narrow stories are characterized by one-sided views of people and things, which can lead to false interpretations of the stories.

Through the development of new stories, people's relationships to their problems change (Combs & Freedman, 2012). The relationship between the practitioner and the participant is collaborative. This fits well with our understanding of narrative identities as co-created. Identities are formed through the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories others tell about us. They are always changing, however, and this provides flexibility for learning and growth. The storytelling practitioner is not an objective expert on peoples' problems or experiences but instead is an expert on understanding how stories affect ideas and identities. As such, their role is to work collaboratively with their participants 'to expose discourses of power differentials that support problems, and to work from a position of collaboration, recognizing clients as the privileged authors of their own stories' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1036).

Practitioners, as do all members of society, come with a cultural background. They should therefore always be sensitive about how their perspectives might be caught up in and influenced by discourses and how those discourses might be reproduced unintentionally in their storytelling workshops.

### *Listening carefully*

An important part of the practitioner's role is to facilitate people's development of 'thick descriptions', that is, rich, meaningful, and multi-stranded stories of people's lives. This involves the skill of listening. In narrative therapy, practitioners are encouraged to especially listen for the following in participants' initial 'problem stories':

- what people treasure
- what the literal exceptions or counterexamples to the problem are
- 'how the problem speaks of the absence of something that is treasured' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1038)

A central practice in narrative therapy is 'double listening': that is, listening carefully for both the experiences that the person is drawing on in the story and the background for the experience (Combs & Freedman, 2012). For example, if the person's experience is frustration, this is likely a sign that they are pursuing purposes, values, and beliefs that they are not able to reach. The practitioner can ask questions that invite the person to notice the values, beliefs, hopes, and dreams related to their frustration or despair. This process can bring out the person's subordinated stories that 'reflect ideas, experiences, and commitments that people give value to, long for, or hold precious' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1041). Revealing such stories encourages a re-authoring conversation about what a person values and what that value means for their identity. Asking about what the person has achieved that fits with this value, however little, is part of the re-authoring conversation. Listening carefully for the implicit or absent goes hand in hand with posing questions to bring out what is 'hidden' in the background.

### *Externalizing conversations*

A central aim of narrative therapy is to separate problems from people. This is done through externalizing conversations. When problems are separate from the person, the person is not seen as pathological and issues such as blame and guilt become less present in their stories.

This is an example of where White's 'double listening' (Combs & Freedman, 2012) would reveal experiences set against contrasting contexts, in other words, where stories about a problem would be contrasted with preferred or treasured stories.

When men who have acted abusively begin to consider how they were recruited into ways of thinking and acting that support violence, they can often step back from those discourses enough to begin to look at the effects of the violence both in their own lives and in the lives of those they have abused. From this position, they can begin to glimpse other possibilities that would have preferred effects (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1045).

By listening for openings to preferred stories, possible pathways to access those openings can emerge. The practitioner should therefore listen for 'unique outcomes.' A unique outcome might be an exception to a problem, but it could also exist while the problem is still happening. A unique outcome can be 'a plan, action, feeling, statement, desire, dream, thought, belief, ability, or commitment' that is an exception, or that would not be predicted by the problem story (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1045). For example, 'if the problem is stealing and the person hesitates before stealing, the hesitation could be a unique outcome that shows a gap in the problem story' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1045).

Unique outcomes are openings to preferred stories. Once the storytelling practitioner identifies a potential unique outcome, asking questions and having a reflective discussion can contribute to developing new stories. Often, these openings develop 'spontaneously' when people are asked about the effects that problems are having on their lives and relationships. If not, the practitioner can also inquire directly for openings by asking questions such as 'Has there ever been a time when the problem tried to get the upper hand, but you were able to resist its influence?' or 'Is the problem always with you?' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1045). Most of the time, these inquiries will lead

to people finding examples of when they were able to avoid the problem or the problem's influence on their life, which then becomes an opening to an alternative story. Another pathway is asking what the problem is not. Examples of questions that can lead to conversations about what experiences the person prefers are: 'What does this say about what you treasure?' and 'Could we say that naming this as problematic means that you don't go along with it? In not going along with it, are you standing for something else?' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1047).

When an opening to a subordinated story has been found, the practitioner supports the person in developing a preferred story by asking questions that can help the person develop a full and memorable alternative story with rich details and meanings. At this stage, questions should have the aim of enhancing aspects of the story that support personal agency. This helps the person to 'experience and appreciate the skills and knowledge that they use in making choices, and the power they exercise in choosing' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1047). The practitioner can also support the person in developing a 'history of the present', which entails extending the story into the future. As previously discussed, continuity in personal narratives is important for positive identity and sense of self. Storytelling practitioners can also focus on linking preferred events across time. This helps to thicken the meaning of people's stories in preferred ways.

Once a preferred story has been found and developed, the practitioner can ask questions to help the person link that story to past events and experiences and to develop a story of those events. Examples of questions are: 'When you think back, what events come to mind that you might be building on, that reflect other times when you could have given up hope, but you didn't?' and 'If we were to interview friends who have known you throughout your life, who might have predicted that you would have been able to accomplish this? What memories might they share with us that would have led them to predict this?' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1047).

Connections between the past, present, and future are important in narrative identities. Once the person has developed preferred stories about the present and the past and has made connections between these, the practitioner can ask questions to generate stories that can help the person to envision, expect, and plan a positive and hopeful future. Examples of such questions are: 'We have just been talking about an accomplishment and several events in the past that paved the way for this accomplishment. If you think of these events as creating a kind of direction in your life, what do you think the next step will be?' and 'You have learned some things that have changed your view of the possibilities for your life. If you keep this new view in your heart, how do you think the future might be different?' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1048).

### ***Documenting new stories***

The majority of people's lives happen outside a storytelling workshop. It is therefore good practice for a person's preferred stories to be documented so they are available to the person between or beyond workshop sessions (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Documents can be letters, certificates, written announcements, audio or video recordings, artwork or poetry. These documents can help to 'thicken' and extend people's experiences and support them in their steps towards their preferred life directions. Collective documents can also be created, such as handbooks for dealing with particular problems.

These documents can be made by the storyteller practitioner or the participants or as a collaborative effort by workshop participants. When created collectively, the ideas and skills gathered by people addressing a particular problem become a way to let their experiences be heard, and they may also provide support to others beyond the initial group.



### **Working with 'outsider witness groups'**

Law (2021) argues that in certain situations, working in groups is more efficient and effective than traditional one-to-one interventions. This is especially the case when dealing with crisis situations because of the flexibility it offers. Working in groups has been used in crisis situations such as in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire in England and has been adopted for use in online platforms during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Two practices are suggested when working with groups: the 'outsider witness retelling process' and the 'definitional ceremony' (which builds on the former). Outsider witness groups can consist of therapists, storytelling practitioners or others, either people who have insider knowledge about a particular problem or people who are important to the participant and who share their story. The outsider witness group's purpose is to amplify and acknowledge participant's preferred stories (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Thus, the outsider witness group provides support beyond simple acknowledgement of the story and recognition of the story's importance to the participant – the 'outsider witness retelling process' amplifies the story. This is not simply a reiteration of what the witnesses heard. The outside witnesses are invited to respond to the stories they have been witness to while following these steps (quoted from Law, 2021, p. 60, italics in original):

1. Identify the expression of the story – What are the key expressions that you have identified from the story?
2. Describe the image that the story has evoked – Did the story evoke any images in your mind?
3. Embodiment responses in their own life experiences – Did the story strike a chord with you?
4. Acknowledge any 'transport' of knowledge (learning) from the story to their own life – How would you acknowledge learning as a result? What would you say to the storyteller who is standing/sitting here with us now in the group?

Here the 'storyteller' is the participant, not the practitioner. Outsider witnesses might be asked to note down their responses, particularly after Steps 1 and 2. They might also be invited to note down acknowledgements that they would like to make to the storyteller, focusing on what they have learned from the story that they find meaningful or helpful in their own life. Thus, as we stated above, this is not a reiteration but a specific practice of reflection, acknowledgement, and contribution (Law, 2021).

A definitional ceremony is a practice that can be powerful for providing a storyteller participant with social acknowledgement for their self-identity. A definitional ceremony builds on and incorporates the steps above through a series of tellings and retellings of stories (Law, 2021, p. 66):

1. The first and essential step is the person shares their story with a group of participants who act as outsider witnesses.
2. One of the participants retells the story in relation to their own lived experience, following the procedure described earlier (outsider witness).
3. The initial storyteller retells the reflections of the outsider witness and explores how those reflections help them develop or take next steps.
4. A third participant retells a story of what they heard in Step 3.
5. Depending on time, these steps can be repeated with even more participants.
6. End with a round of group reflections.

Before undertaking this exercise, it can be helpful for the initial storyteller participant to have some time to think about their experiences or write down a story before telling it to the group. It is recommended that this process be facilitated by a qualified or trained practitioner who can ensure confidentiality and respect during the practice (Law, 2021).

The outsider witness retelling procedure provides a structure to 'scaffold a bigger platform for storytelling, retelling and sharing individual private spaces and identities in the definitional ceremony by recursion of the retelling it-

self' (Law, 2021, p. 69). Each retelling of the story is subtly different from the former and allows the new story to be shaped and transformed into a new experience. The process takes participants 'from known to unknown and known again'.

Each retelling is more powerful than the previous version through the learning process that amplifies the embodied emotion. The approach involves and empowers all participants in the process. The effect of the empowerment is transferred from one participant to another, but each transfer, through the individual participant's retelling, creates a renewal that is something that is larger than participants themselves individually (Law, 2021, p. 69).

What we see happening here exists in the realm of the transpersonal.

### ***Cultural diversity and working with marginalized groups***

On the group level, it can be beneficial to link together people who are working to overcome the same or similar kinds of marginalization so they do not feel alone in their struggle (Combs & Freedman, 2012). When working with various cultural groups, certain elements are important. First, the storytelling practitioner should situate themselves as someone who does not have expert knowledge regarding the participants' lives and circumstances but who is knowledgeable about stories and how they shape people's ideas and identities. It is also important for the practitioner to situate themselves so that other people know a little about what shapes their ideas and biases. This means the practitioner should be open about their cultural background and to recognizing and questioning their own cultural biases (Law, 2021). Some argue that ideally, practitioners should work with groups that are of the same cultural background as themselves (Law, 2021). When this is not possible, an option is to involve a supervisor from the same cultural group as the person that the practitioner is supporting. Another option is for the practitioner to become as knowledgeable as possible about the cultural background of the people they work with.

When using narrative therapy with marginalized groups, including collective documents has been shown to be important. Collective documents become a way for 'people in marginalized positions to be heard and to draw support from others' (Combs & Freedman, 2012, p. 1054). A success story connected with this practice was the use of the collective document created by victims of the Rwandan genocide. When this document was shared with other groups working on similar struggles in different geographical locations, those groups responded by contributing stories about how the document had affected them and adding new material such as drawings and songs. For the people in the initial group, receiving solidarity and support from people around the world was significant. It is perhaps especially when narrative therapy utilizes the collective that possibilities for social justice open up. When problems are removed from the personal or individual to the social realm, it becomes clear that the solutions need not be situated with the individual but are open for collective contributions and that people can collectively contribute to social movements (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

## Conclusion

Social workers often effectively use storytelling interventions based on Michael White's narrative therapy (Carr, 1998) and informed by social work theories and methods to help people facing problems at a personal level. In this context, therapeutic conversations explore multiple options and tend to refrain from opting for one single truth.

This chapter suggested how other practitioners might work with insights from narrative therapy. The storytelling practitioner facilitates and supports the development of life stories in which a person's own agency deals with their life stories and identity. Storytelling helps people find what they treasure and create opportunities that were not available in their original problem stories. The practitioner supports the development of rich, meaningful, and multi-stranded life stories and encourages listening to participants' problem

stories. Here, double listening involves listening carefully to both the person's experience and its background.

Practitioners can also encourage externalizing conversations, which involves separating problems from the people experiencing them. Externalizing conversations imply that people are not intrinsically pathological, and thus they result in blame and guilt being less present in stories. This offers possibilities for creating new preferred stories. New stories can be captured in the form of letters, certificates, written announcements, recordings, and art work by practitioners and/or participants. New stories also allow the possibility of making collective documents available for others. Working in groups appears to be more efficient and effective than one-to-one interventions, especially when it concerns crisis situations. Practitioners could invite outsider groups to retell participants' stories through the practice of reflection, acknowledgement, and contribution. Cultural diversity in narrative therapy can offer marginalized groups possibilities for changing identities and improving well-being.

C

## Conclusions

Stories are told today as they have been told in the past and will continue to be told in the future. For storytelling, one needs structure, tellers, and listeners. Stories offer routes for learning, personality change, and self-development through enhancing our imagination and creativity, offering strategies and simulations for navigating our social worlds and learning social skills. They help us to shift our perspectives to allow for increased empathy and understanding of how others think, feel, and view the world. In addition, they enable people to enter 'safe spaces', where the exploration of emotions can take place without the presence of anxiety. Such exploration creates the possibility of thinking beyond the here and now and creates new vantage points that can result in transformation. When storytelling takes place in a safe space, exploring personal emotions and memories is possible and can lead to personal growth. The distancing-embracing model creates the opportunity for dealing with the distance between suffering depicted in stories and one's emotional reaction to the stories. This creates a position in which power and control are employed in such a way that negative emotions can be experienced in a safe environment. Finally, stories can be characterized by an element of play that allows us to extend and refine cognitive competences in the safety of our imaginations (Dill-Shackleford & Vinney, 2020).

Every phase of life, whether of short or long duration, is characterized by or begun with a change. The hero has become smarter and has had ordeals and interactions, not only with offenders, but also with mentors (Barel, 2021). Storytelling asks us to explore elements that play an important role in our lives. In this book, we have explored such elements as vulnerability, the social context, the community of practice, and processes of identification. These elements have come together to provide insight into storytelling processes, what impacts they can have on individuals and groups and how they can be nourished by narrative therapy.

## Transforming vulnerability into a vital force

Storytelling has the power to help people living in vulnerable circumstances discover how vulnerability can be transformed into vitality. Important questions include how do people in vulnerable circumstances define themselves, what role can narratives play in specific circumstances, and how can they contribute to a 'makeable' world? In the context of universal human vulnerability, the transformation of vulnerability into vitality is not possible, because we are primarily afraid of losing our vulnerability: that is our life. The result may be an increased sense of vulnerability, often involving issues of shame.

We often see that disadvantaged and marginalized groups are confronted with discrimination and injustice. Vulnerability can lead to feelings of being discriminated against, but it can also lead one to discriminate against others. Different from what we may think, people living in vulnerable circumstances can belong to a dominant group and those who are marginalized are not necessarily vulnerable. People living in vulnerable circumstances are often associated with disgust, shame, and fear in such a way that it creates compassion. However, those feelings may instead be associated with social abjection, which involves demeaning and oppressive rhetoric, such as calling someone 'scum' (Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2018), or with the concept of stigma. A stigma is subject to devaluation and shows how negative labels are attached to specific people, places, and objects (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). Moreover, stigmas can take various forms: public stigma, self-stigma, stigma by association, and structural stigma.

Not all stigmatized individuals or groups are prone to low levels of self-esteem. Instead they may use multiple strategies to cope with prejudice, discrimination, and stigmatization while also safeguarding their self-esteem and their psyche from the damage these can cause (Crocker & Major, 1989).



## Awareness of the social context

The social context and the vulnerability being dealt with determine the success of storytelling. For example, people in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic must cope with social suffering (Kleinman, Das & Lock in Kleinman, 2012). Storytelling can help people in such vulnerable circumstances cope by encouraging them to be open to transformation. The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown that the make-ability of society is not clear cut. It involves not only people living in vulnerable circumstances and society but also governmental organizations and what role those organizations play. When governmental organizations cope with unexpected circumstances, they tend to use top-down approaches to control the destabilization caused by a crisis, but this approach is often ineffective. Governmental organizations would do better to foster resilience in relation to unexpected circumstances in a world characterized by risks and insecurity (Beck, 1998; Geldof, 2020).

Another way of looking into the societal context is by looking into the history of colonialism that impacts contemporary daily life. Decolonial and postcolonial studies teach us that not everybody has an equal status and opportunities. Privileged groups often speak on behalf of the non-privileged in ways that are actually disadvantageous for the non-privileged. This is due to unequal power relations (Spivak, 1988). For example, non-western migrants are often seen as culturally deficient, not willing to work or integrate into society. They are also often seen as marginalized people. Silencing these people is an act of injustice that obstructs their obtaining knowledge about their own experiences (Fricker, 2007). Such groups need resilience to cope with their vulnerability.

Resilience, however, is a complicated concept. It is seen as an appropriate response to vulnerability, one that offers a way to cope with traumatizing conditions. There are different approaches to resilience. The engineering approach uses the metaphor of bouncing back, implying that after being stretched, things bounce back to their original position. For applied storytelling, this

means going back to a deficient normality. In contrast, bouncing forward, derived from an adaptive approach to resilience, suggests that a new equilibrium develops. For storytelling, bouncing forward offers possibilities for new insights into one's condition that can trigger positive change. Resilience can be thought of in terms of social and individual resilience. Social resilience refers to communities that can adapt, sustain, and improve their well-being, while individual resilience encapsulates a psychological approach. Resilience has its limits when it comes to changing the current situation (Siemiatycki et al., 2016).

### **Community at the centre of storytelling approaches**

Mutual learning processes within a community of practice are facilitated through identification, mutual engagement, and belonging. Learning together is a transpersonal process of knowing and thinking together, which is fundamental for understanding the problems of real life. Polanyi (1962) calls the process of sharing knowledge 'indwelling'. Here, it is important to distinguish between explicit knowledge (from books, information, records, files, and documents) and tacit knowledge (things that we know but cannot explain). An example of tacit knowledge is riding a bicycle: we may know how to do it, but we cannot explain how it should be done in detail.

To understand the dynamics of a community of practice, two types of community development were explored: needs-based community development (NBCD) and asset-based community development (ABCD). NBCD focuses on exogenous processes in which resources are mobilized from outside the community. Here, the metaphor of a glass that is half empty can be used to show a shortage of resources. These resources are found outside the community. In ABCD, sources may be mobilized through community members. ABCD approaches focus on finding ways to solve problems and on appreciative inquiry, which emphasizes strengthening of the best working features. Thus, the means will be found within the community. Here, the metaphor of a

glass that is half full refers to sources that are available within the community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003).

### **Strengthening a positive identity through storytelling**

Life stories and storytelling impact narrative identity development. Narrative identity includes an individual and a relational focus and imagined and material elements. All these are in flux, which shows that identities can change. Identity development is a co-authored process in which a family and a specific culture determine whether one belongs or not. Stories provide insights about ourselves, but they also depend on their engagement and activity in a specific social and cultural context. This implies that the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion becomes manifest (McLean, 2016).

Storytelling can deal with issues of trauma and risk in such a way that resilience offers possibilities for creating a state of well-being. Therefore, externalizing problems and supporting the development of stories can help to improve one's situation. However, the master narratives that are culturally shared in the mainstream community play an important role. Standards of communication and expectations are factors in becoming part of a community (Pasupathi, 2015).

To help excluded people in marginalized circumstances, it is important to understand the relationship between identity and narratives in a broader social context. Therefore, attention should be given to issues such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality. If narratives impact negatively on a person's vulnerability, shame and blame can result. Awareness-raising can play an important role in getting rid of such internalized stories. In addition, alternative narratives can be developed that lead to active resistance against oppressive master narratives. Change is also possible through narrating positive identities, thus enabling change from negative experiences into stories of growth and resolution (Crocker & Major, 1989).

People's stories are silenced when they are not accepted or not listened to. Silencing a person's story in effect silences that person's sense of self (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Instead of individual psychological approaches, group-oriented opportunities can be developed, and indeed, members of non-western societies may well ask for a group-oriented rather than an individual-oriented approach (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

## Storytelling as narrative therapy

Social workers use social work theories and methods to improve the living conditions and well-being of people, and storytelling can be a useful method to add to their repertoire. Carr (1998) provided an insightful overview of Michael White's narrative therapy, which can be used for dealing with problems at personal and political levels. The therapy is based on conversations that explore multiple options. The practitioner who employs storytelling focuses on life stories and identity formation in such a way that agency can play a role. Instead of using original problem narratives, storytelling can help the client to find the treasure, the gold, within themselves. Therefore, the practitioner helps the client to form meaningful and multi-stranded life stories; this implies listening to the problem story and helping the client construct a new one in context (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

Social workers separate the problem from the person. By doing so, they suggest that the person is not intrinsically pathological and, thus, blame and guilt become less prominently available. This creates opportunities for the development of new stories that create ideas for a better future. Such new stories can take shape in letters, certificates, written announcements, recordings, and artwork by practitioners and/or participants. Such documents can be made available to others.

Both individual and group work can take place. Individual approaches are less efficient than community- and group-based approaches, especially in

the context of a crisis situation. A method of reflection, acknowledgement, and contribution could go together with inviting outsiders to retell stories. It has been shown that cultural diversity and working with marginalized groups can offer possibilities for changing identities and improving their well-being (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

### **Looking backward and forward**

Living in contemporary society involves coping with insecurities and uncertainties, and a strengthening of people within society is required in this respect. However, not everyone can achieve this without help. Storytelling could offer possibilities for finding inner gold at both an individual and a collective level. Stories are to be told – stories that are co-created, stories for listening, stories for mirroring – for storytelling can heal and improve the well-being of those living in vulnerable circumstances. Let this theoretical overview be a contribution to inclusion in society.

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