

Keynote Address

***Listening to all the Voices:
Storytelling and the Path of Expression
in Community Research***

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Introduction

I am delighted to address your conference this morning on the topic of listening to all the voices. I have spent a long career exploring ways in which the wider community could be involved in the planning and development decisions which we make for Australian towns and cities. Today I want to speak about new ways of listening to the stories of those communities and also to suggest that the *community*, as we have come to know it, is a term we need to inspect very carefully. We can no longer identify one homogeneous geographical community or one community of interest in any local government area, whether it be a small town or an inner city municipality.

How do we know what the community wants?

All of us, as community members, or people working in planning, government, the arts or advocacy roles, find ourselves trying to determine what the community wants--so that we can use that information to influence and inform a planning or development decision. We ask ourselves: What are local attitudes to a proposed street closure? How will the new parking arrangements affect patronage on a main street? How can we address crime and vandalism issues and still be fair to young people who say they have nothing to do and nowhere to go? How can we transform our main streets into vibrant and exciting places to shop and socialise--real exemplars of community economic development? And what roles should we accord to the community in making these decisions?

We have many ways of finding out. We conduct surveys, hold meetings, establish reference groups, have search conferences, establish steering committees, lobby government, employ others to do research on our behalf, even beg our academic colleagues to climb down from their towers and have a peek at the real world. A multiplicity of approaches is available to us--ranging from fairly straight survey research to deeper processes which acknowledge the complexity of local political systems. However political or radical these processes can be, they have one thing in common: *they deal with information and the explanation of how things are*. They are primarily *explanatory*. So, for example, to explore falling patronage in a main street which hitherto had been booming, we'd probably recommend a study or two, find someone credible and competent to undertake it, gather information to *explain* what is happening, and identify reasons for it and, importantly, what to do about it.

The Path of Explanation¹

This approach could be called the *path of explanation*. That path usually has the following characteristics: we enter a social situation; we gather information; we identify themes; and we weave them into a descriptive case study which yields a "pattern" model" of explanation. Then we may compare and contrast case studies and finally develop a typology. Throughout this process, the emphasis is on *clarity*. Analysis. Getting clear about what is happening. It is consistent with approaches in other professions, like engineering. In fact, it has been argued that "planning is a form of social engineering in which the objective value-free knowledge of the natural and social sciences can be applied to issues of public policy, just as objective findings of natural science are applied

¹ See Reason and Hawkins, 1988.

through engineering” (Klosterman, 1983: 216-218).² This is how it is, in my experience. And it’s how I conducted social research--at least until a few years ago when my consciousness began to change. A couple of community surveys in Melbourne where a colleague of mine, Graeme Dunstan, provoked me to search for the *deeper stories* finally convinced me that there are significant weaknesses with the path of explanation.³

Some researchers now see this approach as an example of *our outmoded Western story*--a story based on three interrelated beliefs:

- that all entities are separate and discrete
- that only certain ways of knowing are legitimate and
- that we can limit what we accept as “real”.

Critiques of evaluation studies

At the level of social research, similar criticisms have emerged in a widespread critique of the validity of evaluation studies. In one study, the authors express the following concerns:

- satisfaction surveys are *crude examples of positivism and environmental determinism* which conceive of people merely as passive recipients of stimuli which govern the appraisal of environments. People are treated as objects;
- satisfaction surveys rely heavily on the physical variables that affect satisfaction and neglect the social context that affects perceptions. Society is conceived as *aggregations of atomised individuals*;
- little consideration has been given either to national or local forces which shape perceptions or to the influence of diverse social groups;
- respondent’s accounts are often contradictory and confusing, as few respondents are keen to reveal their situation to strangers;
- the use of observable (written, verbal) symbols to express unobservable emotions has many pitfalls: *satisfaction is a construct which the researcher is imposing upon the interviewee which may or may not form a significant part in the latter’s system of meanings*;
- in the search for “convenient” data, researchers assign *attitudes* to particular opinions and behaviour. This discourages the examination of creative problem solving; and
- researchers must go beyond the variables to gain a clearer sense of the subjective experience of respondents. *Why* questions are notorious for confusing answers and non-responses; careful piloting and appropriate probing are necessary if open-ended questions are to be valuable in modifying the researcher’s evaluation and interpretation (Furbey and Goodchild, 1986).

Increasingly, this path--the *path of explanation*--is coming under critical scrutiny, as researchers in fields as diverse as quantum physics, biology and collaborative management are learning that life

² Of course, the assumption of ‘objectivity’ in engineering is a convenient illusion.

³ See Dunstan *et al.*, 1994. I sincerely thank Graham Dunstan for giving voice to this greater Goonawarra story and for his persistence in keeping this voice alive during the research process.

simply isn't like that. It can't be analysed in discrete bits. Communities, in particular, are hard to "divide up" in this way. Sometimes there are stories operating in a community which will not yield to critical analysis. Nonetheless, they are important stories.

I remember conducting a community survey in the isolated suburban Melbourne community of Goonawarra in 1990. My client, the state land developer, wanted to build another 600 houses, to add to the 600-odd privately owned houses already located there. It appears that residents were misled into expecting community facilities at an earlier time than was economically possible. In addition, the initial development was followed by a long period of inaction by the Victorian Government, and broken promises about service provision--particularly services for young people. The estate had deteriorated badly. This mismatch between image and lifestyle expectations probably aggravated residents' feelings of disillusionment and contributed to their subsequent anger at Government.

When we tabulated and analysed the results of resident interviews, conducted with about half the households, we couldn't find a story about what was happening there. The process of tabulating and analysing the survey information had *denatured* it--had bleached the life out of it. We tried to discern the true stories in the tables and the residents' comments. Most residents were very dissatisfied with the State Government's neglect of repeated requests for the promised services and facilities. But we couldn't hear the stories. A most animated debate arose among the researchers over the meaning of *satisfaction*. We struggled to reconcile quantitative data that revealed that 79 percent of residents were satisfied or very satisfied with life in Goonawarra with insights from open-ended interview questions and small group meetings. They led us to believe that any community meeting could expect expressions of anger, hostility and cynicism. People weren't satisfied. We knew that. Thus, we searched for an alternative to the path of explanation.

Finally, we took another tack. We composed a "core story" to explain the community's attitudes to development, and to government. This approach was an attempt to use qualitative findings creatively, to depart from the limitations of accepted sociological and evaluative analysis and ask a larger question: *What is really going on here in Goonawarra?* We found, when we explored it further and checked it out with local residents, that there was a core story of betrayal in this community with respect to planning and development issues. Further, many people expected any initiatives by government to be met by cynicism and the expectation of betrayal. Thus, our report's conclusions and recommendations explored previously unfamiliar territory for planning consultants. We suggested that the government developer's first order of business should be to atone for the wrongs of the past, to make good broken promises (there were lots of them), and to demonstrate goodwill by means of processes which we could only describe as healing.

We engaged in storytelling. We presented our insights in the form of a story to our client and to the community members acting as the study's Accountability Group. At first, the project manager was shocked to hear this story. But when residents' representatives confirmed that this was the first time they had heard representatives of government speak the truth about one of their community stories,

he agreed to accept our “storytelling” advice. Community representatives felt their voices had been heard, the appropriate atonements were made, the plan proceeded without significant difficulty, the Accountability Group grew into a powerful resident’s action group and the quality of life in the suburb significantly improved.

While I would not suggest that the process of storytelling transformed this suburban community, giving voice to that particular local story in direct terms, using words not common in planning parlance, certainly contributed to a rethinking of government’s responsibilities. And when our report, resonating with its stories, received Awards for Excellence in both the State and National awards of the Royal Australian Planning Institute, we felt others appreciated this new approach as well. Now we more confidently use storytelling and visioning in our practice.

The Path of Expression

Back in 1990, when my colleague proposed the core story for Goonawarra, I was unaware that he was reflecting developments that social researchers had been writing about for some time. But now, after four years of full-time Ph.D. study, I can report that storytelling is firmly on the social research agenda. Any of you who sense stories emerging in your work should feel supported in that approach. This approach has been described by some researchers as *the path of expression*.⁴ This path acknowledges the impoverishment of familiar and analytical modes and finds way to allow meaning to be made manifest. It requires the inquirer to partake deeply of the experience, rather than stand back in order to analyse. We can’t find the meaning in the statistics alone. When we follow this path, meaning is part and parcel of experiences: it needs to be discovered, created, or made manifest. When we discover the stories in our communities, to inform planning and development decisions, we partake of life. As co-creators with our communities, we create meaning. In this model, medium and meaning are interpenetrating.

Therefore, if we want to understand the underlying stories of an unsuccessful development, or hopefully, a successful one, it would be foolish to separate bits of information and analyse them as discrete entities. Just as it would be foolish to ask the meaning of a story or painting as separate from the work in itself. When we look at a great work of art, we appreciate the whole of it, don’t we? This approach yields a rich, textural base of information, where the emphasis is on *depth*, rather than clarity.⁵ What we seek is clarity *and* depth. I am sure you’d agree that clarity without depth is empty.

The benefits of storytelling

What is this new model all about? What are the benefits of a storytelling approach? Storytelling is a powerful way of communicating the findings of inquiry to people. It involves socially constructed accounts of past events that are important to members of a community. Stories told are cultural codes; making those codes explicit can help people make sense of their lives. This ethnographic

⁴ Reason and Hawkins, 1988.

⁵ Reason and Hawkins, 1988.

technique has predictive value. It can be used systematically to examine and correlate expectations for relationships.

Common characteristics of stories

Stories have two common characteristics: (1) an event causes a person or a group to want to achieve a goal and (2) a person or a group try to achieve a goal until they reach the goal or until they give up. Stories give meaning to our lives collectively. Creating and sharing stories bond us with common language, imagery and meaning. Community stories are comprised of resonances from individual stories woven with the history and myth of collective experience. Like individuals, communities live in and act out their stories. Future actions and responses are in large part determined by stories being enacted as the experience of community.⁶

When we conduct social research, we often frame the research agenda ourselves, as professionals, and ask questions of survey respondents in interviews, using a standardised questionnaire. They give us answers to the questions we have decided are important. By contrast, when we ask people to *tell stories about what is important to them* (with respect to a particular issue, for example, crime prevention in their town centre), we encourage expression of points of view *through the subjects' eyes*. Research has shown that this approach is more powerful than the commonly used outsider view, which examines subjects' *responses* rather than their *expression*. This approach yields much richer data bases. Reliability is enhanced through the repeated patterns that are identified. One of the key features is the uniqueness of socially constructed meaning formed through storytelling. Put simply, storytelling enhances our understanding of how different groups see their world.

Problems with storytelling

Can we legitimately tell stories as planners, social planners and researchers? Isn't this approach just an excuse to privilege certain voices? Isn't it open to terrible abuses of distortion? If we ask people to tell us their own community stories or if we craft stories from what they tell us, isn't there a problem that they (and we) will distort the meaning of community situations? What about the social scientist's need for objectivity and validity? Isn't there a problem that loosening controls over research could lead to problems of bias in interpretation? All these are concerns, to be sure. Like any powerful technique, storytelling can be used in creative and oppressive ways. Our job is to ensure that it not used for oppressive means.

What is important, however, is to acknowledge that the "traditional" ways of conducting social research are not entirely value-free. I know from thirty years of interpreting social survey results how difficult it is to suspend one's own values. I may be concerned about loneliness, or vandalism or crime and therefore find evidence for my concerns in the survey results. Similarly, we need to be careful in interpreting stories. With stories, at least, we can identify the strength of feeling and the intensity with which a story resonates with the community. But we do need to be careful.

⁶ See Dunstan *et al.*, 1990.

A meeting of the ways: explanation and expression

The best way to proceed, it seems to me, is to find a meeting between two paths--*explanation* and *expression*--to be able to select between them and sometimes to allow them to run in parallel. To combine social research and techniques of storytelling through a blend of carefree, cautious and creative knowing. When we use stories, our interpretations benefit from dramatic recall, strong metaphors and illusions. We can reflect, recreate and echo back what people tell us. This approach allows multiple, often conflicting and paradoxical interpretations to emerge and opens up opportunities for richness. These new approaches--embedded in a new paradigm of social research--can challenge how we are in relation to the "subjects" of our research/of our planning. We become one who does not know--one who is discovering. We may even reach the point where researchers tell stories about their own lived experience.⁷

If I were going to use this approach in studying, for example, the reasons for increasing crime and vandalism in a town centre, how would I be as social researcher? First, I would not try to eliminate effects of my participation as a researcher. I would admit that my participation will affect what I am studying. I can't leave the situation undisturbed. I would accord status and authority to qualitative data and respect the emotional and intuitive components of the stories people told me. I would concentrate on the commonsense features of everyday life which "everybody knows". I would strive to achieve an attitude of respect towards the social world I was investigating. In effect, my approach would be one of *methodological humility*, where multiple versions of people's realities would be given status.

The important point here is that, as social researcher, I would be part and parcel of the social world under investigation. In determining what is important to report, I would rely on those I am studying. What's real, what is really important to people, would be primarily defined by them, and not by me as a researcher. Rather than interpreting data and trying to make my own story, my own interpretation, I would try to co-create the story with the original storytellers.

How to find a local story

Understanding my role as a social researcher within this emergent paradigm does not necessarily teach me how to find a local story or stories. In the Goonawarra story, we, the consultants, dissatisfied with the impoverished, mundane story represented in the survey tables and charts, took a punt at one local story, a core story of the community's experience with planning and development and the bureaucracy. We wrote our own version and presented it to the residents. Their response--strong and clear--was that we captured the essence of their predicament. From that acknowledgment of distrust and betrayal flowed a number of precise recommendations to the developer. In our co-created core story, the "inventory of complaints" was given status and treated with respect. Our best guess at the local *myth* was presented as an offering, an attempt to explain--from the place of

⁷ See Krasniewicz, 1992 and Sarkissian, 1996.

detachment and overview that myth can provide--the power and tenacity of the local story in terms of a *Great Story*.⁸

The Great Story: using myth and archetype

We proposed a way of interpreting the results in terms of a *core story*--raising the findings of the local story to the level of myth or archetype to reveal the underlying patterns which connect individual stories and community stories. It was our "best guess" at the *greater story* of Goonawarra, offered with humility. We acknowledged that only *local* people can know their local stories and speculate on the relevance of any *Great Story* of a community.

We asked, how does a core story of a community become recognised and understood? Firstly, like a personal story, we cannot know it for what it is, because it changes as we become aware of it fully and, like the onion, it reveals itself in layers. There is no right answer in this search for story, rather a sense of deepening insight and more revealing questioning as we get closer. Examining a core story within the context of a *Great Story* allows us to see the patterns of connections between events and players. It can enable more accurate prediction of how the story could further unfold.⁹

Because a core story must have the qualities of a *Great Story* to lift it above the mundane, local, everyday story, heroic language was used. One *core story* about planning and development for the Goonawarra Estate could be told in the following manner:

Once there was a promised land where a band of hero/pioneers were invited to settle (just off an expressway, on an escarpment with great views and around a Golf Course--a country club Estate, city living country style). They didn't expect it to be perfect and knew they would have to work hard to earn the right to be there, but they were confident because the local princes and barons made them welcome on arrival and promised them so much.

Then came betrayal. There was turmoil in the kingdom and the princes, engaged in other battles, lost interest in our heroes. The princes fought the barons. The barons, who wanted the land deal but had little interest in supporting heroes who would challenge the prevailing power structure, turned against our hero settlers. The heroes fought many battles and had some victories. But it was an unfair fight and in the end the heroes not only fell from favour and were unable to get their just rewards, they were also punished for daring to demand them. They withdrew and, leading lesser lives (basically content but cynical), they nursed their hurts and watched weeds grow around a dream that had once seemed within their grasp.¹⁰

In our report, we suggested that there were four suggested steps to renewing that sad story:

⁸ See Houston, 1982, 1987, and 1992.

⁹ We have used a similar approach in workshops on market segmentation in housing and arterial road planning. See: Sarkissian Associates Planners and Housing Industry Association, 1990; Sarkissian *et al.*, "Conference of the Birds," 1994; Sarkissian *et al.*, "The Gods Must be Crazy," 1994; Rucci *et al.*, 1996; Dunstan and Sarkissian, 1990; and the *Listening to all the Voices* videotape, 1994.

¹⁰ Dunstan *et al.*, 1990.

- A telling of the story in a way that accepts its truth and acknowledges its power and pain;
- An atonement in which there is an exchange that settles the differences;
- A ceremony or ritual emerging out of true local involvement and commitment by government, local and state, that publicly acknowledges the new beginning; and
- An ongoing commitment and trust that a new approach is possible and will be acted upon.

Listening to all the voices: lessons from storytelling

For several years, I and some of my colleagues have been producing advisory materials for local government, community members and practitioners to assist in conducting community participation processes. Our most recent publication, *Community Participation in Planning: A Practical Guide* (1997), sets out some ideas for *community visioning*, a process which is gaining in popularity in Australia and overseas.¹¹ I can see parallels between the storytelling approaches discussed in this paper and the approaches of those who specialise in community visioning. Rather than relying so heavily on the presumed objectivity of survey research, we could find creative ways of guiding community members--by means of a visioning or future visualisation exercise--to explore the stories which resonate within the community.

Conclusions: Listening to the softest voices

I believe that, given the diverse communities we live in and are responsible for and the complex social, environmental and economic factors constraining our work, we need to be more creative in our social research. I can visualise great community economic development and marketing benefits in exploring and then articulating a community's stories. I can imagine community visioning blossoming in small communities struggling to find an identity, establish an economic base, and secure employment opportunities for their citizens. I can anticipate a weaving of bright multicultural threads throughout the tapestry of those stories, acknowledging the multiplicity of diversity. For Main Streets, I see the physical manifestation of stories and visions in signage and interpretative community information, community cultural planning and development. I can imagine a flowering of cultural planning as local people seek to articulate their own stories. And I can behold visions of a brighter future, a future in which we listen to all the voices, in song and story, articulated in our communities.

Finally, we need to honour the multiplicity of diverse communities whose needs will be addressed by planning and development decisions. Not all their members are human. We need to extend our *moral*

¹¹ *Visioning* is now used to describe a range of techniques or processes which allow community groups collectively to develop a common strategic vision for an area. Community values and aspirations are openly tabled as participants articulate the issues and concerns, likes and dislikes. Special characteristics are identified for future improvement or protection (Ng, 1996: 20).

As Walker explains, community visioning has evolved from three local-level activities: futures projects, strategic planning, community architecture and planning. The key features are: extensive participation, an emphasis on community values, wide use of graphics and visual materials, exploration of alternative futures and an emphasis on a shared vision (Walker, 1994: 1; see also Rounsefell, 1991).

*community*¹² to include members of the wider Earth community. Our human lives are woven into the complex web of an interconnected and interdependent global community, encompassing both the human and nonhuman world. Our planning and development actions, and ultimately our consideration and our caring, need to acknowledge the needs of *all* members of that wider community. We need to discover and refine ways to listen with our third ears to the stories of the softest voices--the voices of the nonhuman world. Then, and only then, will the exquisite harmony of our greater stories speak to us. Resonate within us. And guide us.

¹² See Etzioni, 1993.

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