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Empowerment from a narrative perspective

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Empowerment from a Narrative Perspective:

Learning from Local Memory Websites

Abstract

The exploration of the narrative nature of local memory websites in relation to empowerment theory produces new insights in the nested levels of analysis of both. Empowerment's value orientation calls for a focus on strengths instead of weaknesses and, as such, requires specific language that accommodates the conviction that resources are locally available, instead of scarce. Consequently, empowerment theory describes resources as being present in processes and outcomes on interdependent psychological, organizational and communal levels. The application of the empowerment framework's components to the theoretical outcomes and processes of local memory websites illuminates the connecting roles local narratives play as resources in empowerment. First of all, personal stories, community narratives and dominant cultural narratives influence and support each other across levels. Secondly, narratives spread local knowledge which leads to shared values and common beliefs for collectives on various levels. And thirdly, the sharing of narratives happens through social networks that manifest themselves on different levels, which, as such, facilitate sharing other resources. Based on these perspectives, we offer a simplified model for empowerment with a focus on the interdependencies between levels of networks. Against this background, we discuss relevant analytical perspectives as a departure point for the empirical exploration of unstudied relations between empowerment and local memory websites.

Introduction

Several arguments drive the exploration of the nexus of empowerment phenomena, narrative theory and research on local memory websites in this article. Julian Rappaport was one of the first to urge the empowerment research community in 1995 to combine “the study of empowerment ... with a narrative approach to theory and method” (1995, p. 796). In that article, he substantiates this advice by emphasizing practical and theoretical analogies between the two approaches. Since he regards narratives as crucial resources in empowerment processes, empowerment practice should ideally involve helping people to create settings where they can discover, create and enhance their own community narratives and personal stories. Theoretically, the mutual influence between personal, group and community narratives could give new insights into how individual, group and community empowerment are interdependent. In addition, Rappaport mentions the corrective power a narrative approach might offer to the excessive focus on individual empowerment by more explicitly including empowerment of collectives.

Several studies followed Rappaport suggestions and booked progress with respect to the fusion of empowerment approaches and narrative theory (Harrell & Bond, 2006; Maton, 2000; Rossing & Glowacki-Dudka, 2001; Schensul, 2009; Williams, Labonte, & Brien, 2003). However, within the empowerment framework, the individual bias and the lack of knowledge on the interdependencies across levels of analysis still remains a contemporary challenge. For example Paul Speer states that “a disproportionate emphasis on process combined with our disciplinary bias as psychologists has resulted in overly individualistic theoretical explanations” (2008). Already in 1993 Stephanie Riger warned for the drawbacks of this focus which indirectly, but excessively, nurtures autonomy at the cost of communion, and, as such, favors masculine predispositions over female ones (1993). In addition to the, still present, urgency for more

attention to collective aspects of empowerment, Brian Christens just recently claimed that “[m]ore research that assesses the transactions between empowerment processes at different levels of analysis is badly needed” (2013, p. 373).

The upcoming field of studying memory in the digital age (Hoskins, 2011; Roediger & Wertsch, 2008; Vermeulen et al., 2012) shows similar issues, but might also contain possible solutions. Part of the research in this field studies local aspects of collecting personal memories online and how this can contribute to the social sustainability of the community (Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, & Reading, 2009; Stillman & Johanson, 2007). A review of studies on these local memory websites has shown that the concepts applied for describing the social benefits can be systematized in a way that is congruent with the notion of empowerment having an individual, a group and a community level (Kreek & Zoonen, 2013a). However, the claims about the collective levels – the group and community level – are poorly substantiated with empirical data, while contemplated long term online participation is strongly incorporated in the associated argumentations. The explanation for this is that the existing academic literature shows an emphasis on institutional interventions that, often unintentionally, prevent online participation. Consequently, this leads to a focus on individual benefits in this field as well, be it for different reasons than mentioned earlier.

Following these observations, an analysis of 80 cases from the field of local memory websites (Kreek & Zoonen, 2013b) showed that they are more often initiated by residents and local associations than by institutions. In addition, and more importantly for the aims of this article, some of the cases offer rich empirical data on online participation. One example is the award-winning living history website My Brighton and Hove from the United Kingdom with a claimed 11.000 memories since its start in 2000 and an estimated similar number of comments. Another example is the Amsterdam memory website 'The Memory of East', initiated in 2003,

with close to 2.500 memories, 15.000 comments and 2.100 requests. The narrative nature of these big datasets of digital memories and comments offer an empirical space within which the described issues might be partly solved. Departing from regarding narratives as important resources for empowerment, we can try to identify what levels of narrative resources these data contain and how these levels are interrelated, by keywords, persons, overlap in content or other forces. In turn, the identified narrative resources on collective levels can be compared to the tentative claims of empowerment outcomes in the present academic literature described by Kreek et al. (2013a).

The methodological spectrum of analyzing large databases with user generated content is broad (Burgess & Green, 2009), which might have lead Mathews and Sunderland to state that “[their] search for other work that maps out ways of analyzing large-scale databases of life narratives did not produce a model for us to follow” (2013, p. 101). Consequently, the central challenge of this article is to elaborate how narrative theory can further contribute to the empowerment framework by discussing the empirical data of local memory websites as empowering niches from a narrative perspective. In doing so, we first return to what empowerment entails as a value orientation and as a theoretical model. Discussing the current empirical research on empowerment we summarize three nomological frameworks that describe three levels of analysis: psychological, organizational and communal empowerment. Next, we compare the outcomes and processes that are ascribed to local memory websites with these three frameworks. This leads to the conclusion that narratives and related local knowledge play a role on different levels of empowerment, but also that personal stories bear a connection to community or group narratives and vice versa. Finally, certain aspects of narrative theory and related network theory are discussed as analytical perspectives to further pursue the manifestation of empowerment in the context of active local memory websites.

The empowerment framework

What the term empowerment entails is perhaps best introduced by the first sentence of Marc Zimmerman's chapter on Empowerment Theory in *The Handbook of Community Psychology*:

Empowerment is both a value orientation for working in the community and a theoretical model for understanding the process and consequences of efforts to exert control and influence over decisions that affect one's life, organizational functioning, and the quality of community life. (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 43)

We will start by introducing the value orientation because it has consequences for the theoretical model and the research being conducted in the field of empowerment.

Empowerment as a value orientation on how social change happens

The origin of empowerment is usually linked to Paul Freire's work (1973) on the development of critical consciousness as a way for oppressed people to liberate themselves (Hur, 2006). The term *empowerment* is most frequently used in the discipline of community psychology (Hur, 2006) and appears in its journals from 1978 onwards (Hoffman, 1978). Empowerment, as value orientation, departs explicitly from capabilities and resources, commonly present among the citizens in local settings, to improve quality of individual and communal life. In doing so, it turns away from regarding mutual help as a scarce commodity and from imposing professional help on the community and its members (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000). For example Maton views "empowerment as a participatory-developmental process—

occurring over time, involving active and sustained engagement, and resulting in growth in awareness and capacity” (Maton, 2008, p. 5). As such, it has been part of discourses on community psychology, health promotion and social work (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004).

Consequently, the core of the term empowerment as value can be claimed to be related to emancipation of individuals, groups and communities to gain control over their affairs. Its ethical values are, among others, social justice, democracy, pluralism and diversity (Regenmortel, 2011). Emancipation interventions are common, but a key characterizing value for empowerment is that an empowerment approach focuses on the positive sides of a situation instead of the causes of problems that might be present. This way it identifies strengths instead of risk factors and does not reduce people to their illnesses, weaknesses or other issues they might have (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; Rappaport, 1987; Regenmortel, 2011; Zimmerman, 2000). As such, it rejects the current language employed in many contexts of professional help. This language “used to describe the helping process unwittingly encourages dependence on professionals, creates the view that people are clients in need of help, and maintains the idea that help is unidirectional” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 44). Replacing terms such as ‘client’ by ‘participant’ in the language of empowerment, on the other hand, meta-communicates that involved people *can* find indigenous resources and help each other (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000).

Obviously, these value orientations have important consequences for thinking about how social change happens and how it can be facilitated. An empowerment approach involves a different attitude of the professional or researcher towards the people of concern. In order to enhance strengths “[t]he professional's role becomes one of collaborator and facilitator rather than expert and counselor. As collaborators, professionals learn about the participants through their cultures, their worldviews, and their life struggles” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 44). Similarly, participants become collaborators with the professionals or researcher in the same process, setting

the agenda and steering the process in other directions when necessary. Helping structures are no longer considered as scarcity but as something which is available but needs to be found and fueled. This makes empowerment consciously considered to be an open-ended process, which will manifest itself differently for distinct people, organizations and settings (Rappaport, 1987). As result, rigid, universal solutions to issues in society or its members should be suspected, because each local setting, group or individual has its own diversity of strengths and, thus, solutions. The world view, consisting of the above value orientations, has important consequences for empowerment theory which will follow next.

Empowerment as theoretical model

The bottom line of empowerment theory is that participation processes invoke developments that can lead to outcomes in terms of an improved quality of life on various levels. Accordingly, two aspects of empowerment describe its conceptual framework: it is a multilevel construct and it consists of empowerment processes and outcomes. Both processes and outcomes can manifest themselves on the individual level, the organization or group level and the community level. These levels are also often called micro, meso and macro level. Empowering processes vary across levels these levels of analysis. For example, participation in a communal activity might be an empowering process for an individual; shared decision making might be at an organizational level; and accessible media resources might be at the community level (Zimmerman, 2000). Similarly, empowerment outcomes also vary across the levels of analysis. Examples of outcomes are skills for individuals, resources procurement for organizations and for organizational coalitions for the community (Zimmerman, 2000). Processes and outcomes are not only related to each other on one single level of analysis, but they also influence the other levels of analysis: “Individual, organization, and community empowerment are mutually interdependent and are

both a cause and a consequence of each other” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 46). So the empowerment outcomes on one level are related to the empowering processes on other levels. And, vice versa, empowering processes on one level can also contribute to outcomes other than its own level. In addition, once individuals, organizations and communities are empowered to a certain degree, they can be involved in empowering processes on their own specific level.

In addition to processes and outcomes on different levels and their interdependencies, empowerment theory takes broader contextual conditions or settings into consideration, which gives the theory an ecological nature (see for example Christens, 2013; Rappaport, 1987). Contexts, or settings, differ, for example in the available roles for community members, in the information available as resource and in the measure in which members or groups gain actual responsibility. In addition, settings each have their own criteria to define what it is to be empowered (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005). At the same time, once the criteria are defined, they change over time under influence of empowering processes, be they related to professional interventions or not. Admitting that it is unusual to confess “that we learn from the failures as well as the successes” (1987, p. 137), Rappaport states that both positive and problematic characteristics of settings should be studied. Although empowered individuals are considered fundamental for empowerment processes at organizational level and community level, it should be noted that empowerment outcomes on those latter levels are not simply the aggregate of many empowered individuals (Zimmerman, 2000). Instead, these outcomes are considered to be emergent properties of empowerment processes (Ennis & West, 2013; Fedi, Mannarini, & Maton, 2009; Gilchrist, 2000). Empowerment on the community level, for example, does not necessarily include authoritative power, but can include the emergent properties such as the “capability to reward (or punish) causal agents, influence public debate and policy, and shape community ideology and consciousness” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 57).

Empowerment as a construct of three nomological networks

Since empowerment manifests itself in different forms in different populations, contexts and times, it “requires the specification of interrelationships among observable phenomena that represent abstract concepts” in each of those different situations (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 587). However, although empowerment cannot be assessed by a single universal operational definition, because the construct is open ended, this does not imply that empowerment knows no general framework at all. Zimmerman (1995) adopts the notion of a ‘nomological network’ from Cronbach and Meehl (1955) as a basis for construct validation which they consider to be open-ended by definition. As such, researchers within the field acknowledge this open-endedness as a given, not as a deficit of the framework. A number of authors have described the different levels of empowerment in the form of these nomological networks and tested them empirically in different contexts (Christens, 2012; Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004; Zimmerman, 1995). This work has led to three nomological networks describing the more stable components and qualities: psychological empowerment, organizational empowerment and community empowerment. The short summary on these networks that follows has been distilled from a set of articles covering a period of 20 years.

Psychological empowerment can be defined as the “psychological aspects of processes by which people gain greater control over their lives, participate in democratic decision-making, and develop critical awareness of their sociopolitical environments” (Christens, 2012, p. 114). The authors on this sub-construct have emphasized that it is not similar to individual-level empowerment which is often characterized by individualism, independence and control (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004; Riger, 1993; Zimmerman, 1995). Accordingly, research on psychological empowerment claims to explicitly include relationships with empowerment processes and outcomes at other levels of analysis. Recently, a relational component has been added to even

more strongly involve the communal processes (Christens, 2012). Empirical research currently shows a nomological network with four components. The emotional component refers to how people perceive and experience their capabilities, the cognitive to how people understand and relate to their social environment, the relational to interpersonal activity across various settings and the behavioral to actual participation in the life of the community. Each of these components has its own subset of possible qualities that are interrelated across the components (see the next section). The four components and their qualities can be used for assessing a person's psychological empowerment level on a fixed moment like it is a snapshot. Changes in such a snapshot are driven by various empowering processes that are usually articulated for one component, but often feed more qualities across the components. For example working with other people on a collective goal can nurture one's collaborative competence, but also one's critical awareness of one's environment. Christens (2012) offers an overview of the research on these detailed levels.

Rather recently the organizational or group level of empowerment analysis has started to be covered by research (Maton, 2008; Perkins et al., 2007; Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004; Zimmerman, 2000). According to Peterson et al. this was an important step in order to "mov[e] empowerment theory beyond individual bias, that is, the tendency to reduce complex person-in-environment phenomena to individual dynamics, which has dominated fields such as psychology ... and social work" (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 129). Ignoring contextual issues, such an individual bias could lead to blaming individuals for their situation, a development that conflicts with the values of empowerment, as described above. Moreover, when interventions, based on such a theory, focus solely on personal empowerment this nurtures individualism and as such threatens community empowerment (Christens, 2013; Riger, 1993; Woodall, Warwick-Booth, & Cross, 2012). The present components of organizational empowerment are intra-organizational,

inter-organizational, and extra-organizational. The intra-organizational component includes the organizational characteristics that provide the infrastructure for members to participate in achieving collective goals. The inter-organizational component includes vital relationships with and collaboration across organizations. The extra-organizational component refers to how organizations affect the larger environments of which they are a part. Similar as for psychological empowerment, each of these components has a set of several interrelated qualities which can be measured to arrive at a level of empowerment of an organization at a certain moment. Each component knows a set of processes that can drive changes in the qualities (see next section).

Empowerment at the community level is less developed than the other levels in terms of a nomological network. In the context of empowerment 'community' is often limited to a certain locality, like a city neighborhood or a city district. Often this is a level of organization with accompanying groups and organizations that is distinguishable from larger organizational structures like the whole city, a nation or society. On this level only one component can clearly be distinguished in the literature. It could be called the intra-communal component, describing the communal characteristics that optimize the participation of community members and organizations in assuring quality of life (Gilchrist, 2009; Maton, 2008; Zimmerman, 2000). An inter-communal and extra-communal level is outside the scope of the reviewed literature but can easily be imagined, because communities interact with other communities which are part of the same larger whole like a city or a region (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005).

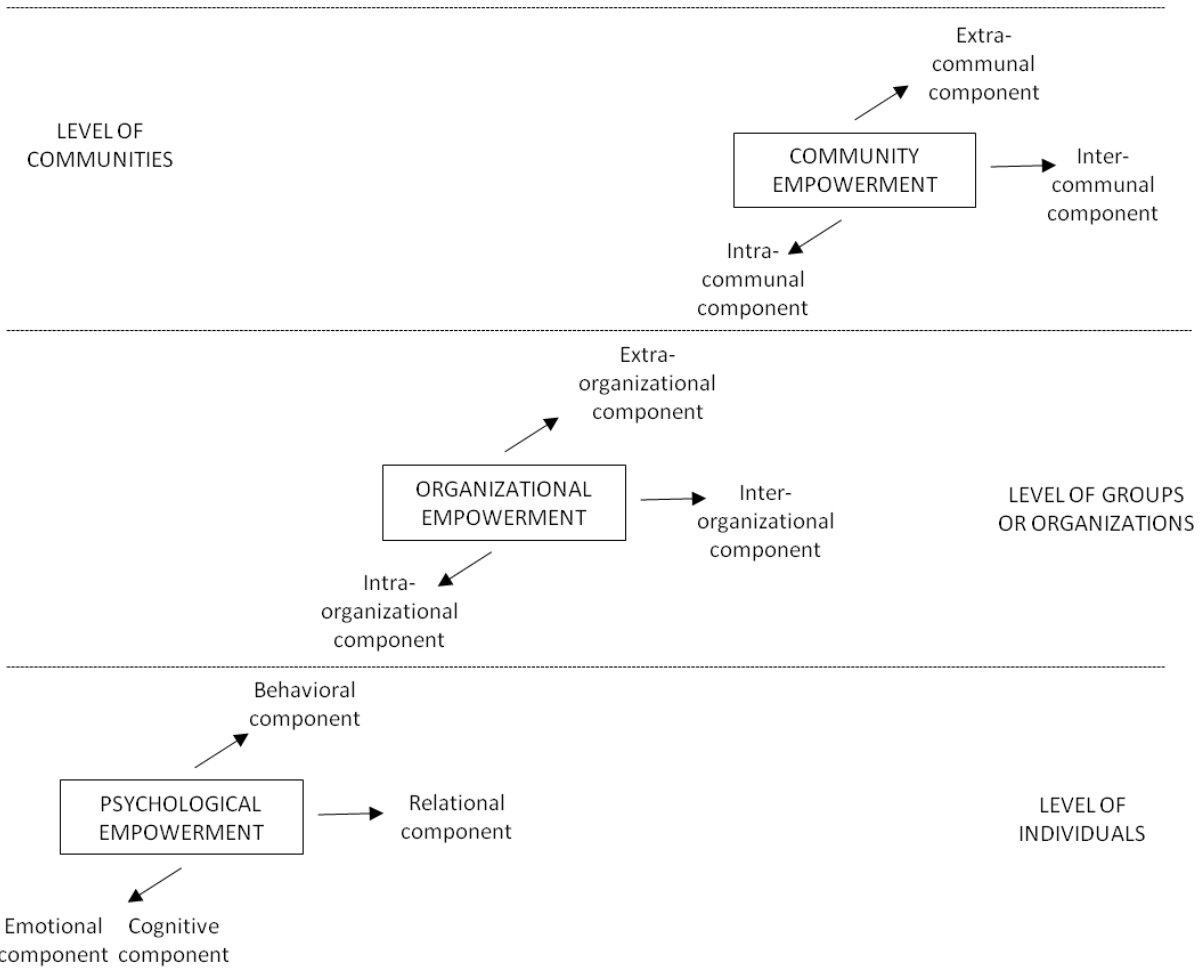


Figure 1: The framework of the three nomological networks of empowerment

The three nomological networks are depicted in Figure 1. It shows for each level which component is representative for participation on the next level and which one is for involvement of elements of lower levels. The figure is a severe simplification of the complexity of the empowerment framework, because, for example it does not show which components on the individual level are positively influenced by the intra-organizational aspects. Although clear insights on those empowering characteristics are available for a range of settings, Peterson et al. call for more attention to the extra-organizational component about how organizations “shape the broader systems of which they are part” (2004, p. 137). This is why “more research that assesses

the transactions between empowerment processes at different levels of analysis is badly needed” (Christens, 2013, p. 373). Despite the mentioned simplification the figure can make one wonder why organizations and communities do not explicitly have a emotional component, because emotional aspects can play an important role on collective levels as well (Gilchrist, 2009).

Empowerment in the context of local memory websites

Comparing local memory to the empowerment framework

Below, we compare the levels of the empowerment framework with those of the synthesis that emerged from our review of the academic literature on local memory websites (Kreek & Zoonen, 2013a). Table 1 shows the individual level from empowerment theory and Table 2 the individual level of our synthesis.

Table 1: Outcomes and processes psychological empowerment

Individual	Emotional	Cognitive	Relational	Behavioral
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Domain specific perceived control · Domain specific self-efficacy · Motivation to control · Perceived competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Critical awareness · Knowledge on causal agents · Skill development · Skill transfer across life domains · Resource mobilization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Collaborative competence · Intercultural competence · Facilitation of others' empowerment · Network mobilization · Open to pass on legacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Community involvement · Organizational participation · Coping behaviors
Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Developing a sense of community · Building a sense of control and confidence · Reflecting on own role · Feeling connected to others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Identifying resources · Applying new skills · Discussing and solving issues · Developing new understandings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Working with others · Developing new relations · Including others · Helping others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Participating in activities and organizations · Attempting to exert control · Participating in decision-making · Improving community life

Table 2: Our synthesis for the individual level for local memory websites (Kreek & Zoonen, 2013a)

Individual	Emotional	Cognitive	Relational	Behavioral
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Individual sense of place · Individual identity · Self-efficacy · Self-confidence · Pride · Joy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Vernacular literacy · Self-expression · Historical consciousness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Intercultural awareness · Individual social network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Presence in the media landscape · Voice
Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Remembering a local experience · Reflecting on a memory · Receiving comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Participating in workshop · Creating a digital memory · Specializing in a theme or location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Interacting with others · Developing new relations · Including others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Interviewing a person · Reading a memory · Leaving a comment · Participating in activities

Obviously, representing a specific kind of setting, Table 2 is more concrete (e.g. with respect to the skills involved) than Table 1 which covers various settings. Despite the former being a more specific construct, many of its aspects are similar to or can be associated with aspects of the latter. For example, someone specializing in memories about a certain locality (cognitive component Table 2) could be claimed to identify resources (cognitive component Table 1). Aspects that clearly differ can be summarized in the observation (see for example the emotional outcomes in both tables) that in the context of local memory websites there seems to be less emphasis on “efforts to exert control and influence over decisions that affect one's life” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 43). Instead, voice emerges together with joy and pride through expressing one-self online. The individual voice in this context is not consciously attempting to change the system of which it is part. Nevertheless, it can be claimed to be related a more equal access in the media-landscape with an important democratic potential at collective levels (Burgess, 2006; Prilleltensky, 2008) to which we turn next, considering the organizational or group level of analysis in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3: Outcomes and processes organizational empowerment

Organizational	Intra-organizational	Intra-organizational	Extra-organizational
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Viability · Under-populated settings · Collaboration of co-empowered subgroups · Resolved ideological conflict · Resource identification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Collaborations · Resource procurement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Influence on public policy and practice · Creation of alternative community programs and settings · Deployment of resources in the community
Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Managing incentives · Linking subgroups · Offering broad role opportunities · Fostering inspirational and shared leadership · Supporting with resources · Fostering a group-based believe system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Accessing social networks of other organizations · Participating in alliance building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Implementing community actions · Disseminating information community programs and settings · Radiating influence of empowered individuals · Educating the public

Table 4: Our synthesis for the organizational level for local memory websites (Kreek & Zoonen, 2013a)

Organizational	Intra-organizational	Intra-organizational	Extra-organizational
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Intimate publics · Reflective practices · Creative community · Social connectivity · Social learning · Social capital · Social networks · Co-creation · Resilience · Common sense of place · Inclusion · Social cultural understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Collective action · Cultural value · Ownership · Social history · Community identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Influence on community memory · Practice of cultural citizenship · Development community capacity
Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Organizing workshops · Introducing new themes · Organizing exhibitions · Organizing jubilee · Organizing regular meetings · Organizing history walks · Commenting in a group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cooperating with local media · Collaborating with local institutions · Collaborating with active local groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Organizing dissemination meetings · Organizing exhibitions · Spreading personal memories

The terminology differences in the intra-organizational outcomes make it clear that the context of local memory websites is more like a ‘community of practice’ than an ‘organization’, the former

showing less structure and more creativity than the latter. This should be no surprise because in the contexts of local memory websites there can be various ideologies in different participating groups for creating and collecting memories about their neighborhoods. Some of them are activist groups consciously archiving certain memories before they get lost and others are just sharing local memories because it gives them joy and satisfaction. This makes it clear that narratives are not only one of the resources shared in these settings, but creating and collecting them – be it for different reasons – is the main practice of all the participating groups and individuals involved. Stephanie Riger emphasizes the differences between instrumental (Table 3) and expressive contexts (Table 4) by associating the former with agency, mastery and control, and the latter communion, interaction and relationship (Riger, 1993).

This difference also shows at the extra-organizational level of Table 4, where the outcomes are described with three concepts: community memory, cultural citizenship and community capacity (Kreek & Zoonen, 2013a). Firstly, in constructing community memory, residents present their own views online on how the past and present of a particular area should be represented for future use. While these views do not replace the professional historical interpretations, they do extend the available reservoir of texts and interactions related to a certain locality. Moreover, this is a self-enforcing process, because these views are easily distributed online, and at the same time their authentic character invites other residents to participate in this process. Secondly, as a practice of cultural citizenship, people use local memory websites to creatively express their experiences of and opinions about the local culture. Alongside commercial popular culture and institutional discourses, these environments form a growing independent public sphere where meaning is negotiated and cultural value is judged by ordinary people. Finally, with respect to community capacity, the community members share memories and experiences in new online social networks, creating their own discourse in favor of future

collective action. Again, this does not necessarily replace community-building professionals, although it does influence their profession because their work may shift towards facilitating a co-creative community.

The narrative nature of local memory websites as empowering resource

Some empowering aspects of local memory websites have been suggested in the previous section. What makes these contexts unique is that the main practice consists of creating and collecting memories. This resembles what Rappaport suggests discussing the relation between empowerment and narratives emphasizing the latter as *resources*: “The ability to tell one's story, and to have access to and influence over collective stories, is a powerful resource” (1995, p. 802). In this context Rappaport distinguishes three types of narratives: a story, a community narrative and dominant cultural narratives. A ‘story’ is defined as being an individual’s communication of events or experiences unique to that person. A community narrative is characterized by the fact that it is recognized and shared by a group of people. Neighborhoods, for example, may have shared narratives that “tell the members something about themselves, their heroes, their history, and their future” (Rappaport, 1995, p. 803). Dominant cultural narratives are distributed through mass media or institutions and may communicate stereotypes which are known by most people in society and, as such, “serve as an influential backdrop against which more localized community narratives and personal stories are told” (Rappaport, 1995, p. 803). If one cannot relate to a community narrative, one’s personal stories are easily ignored, if not devalued, by others who do link to a community narrative. This brings up issues about who controls the creation, the selecting and telling of stories about oneself or narratives about a community. Places where various personal stories and community narratives are shared and valued open-mindedly could be considered as empowering setting (Rappaport, 1995). Based on the current academic literature

and the comparison in the previous section, local memory websites and their communities offer such places (Klaebe, Adkins, Foth, & Hearn, 2009; Kreek & Zoonen, 2013a). Especially coming from a century in which the local community is thought to have eroded considerably, “the reweaving communities through shared narratives” is shown to be a promising remedy (Rossing & Glowacki-Dudka, 2001, p. 732).

Towards a research approach

According to Rossing, community members involved in narrative processes discover connections between selves and others, penetrate barriers to understanding, come to know more deeply the meanings of their historical and cultural narrative and develop their understanding of self and others through a sense of connection across individual narratives (2001, p. 740). As such, these processes can lead to shared values and common beliefs, outcomes which ought to be studied critically, because, when becoming too dominant, they might also exclude or stigmatize individuals (Rappaport, 1995; Rossing & Glowacki-Dudka, 2001; Speer, 2008). According to Speer this shaping of “collective consciousness” is a manifestation of social power in which individuals and community can be influenced through “ideologies, knowledge, customs, and belief systems” (2008, p. 201).

Rossing suggests that research on community development should go beyond nomological networks toward a humanistic approach in which narratives and stories are central (Rossing & Glowacki-Dudka, 2001). Nomological models are associated with paradigmatic reasoning that can be described in terms of recognizing specific experiences as members of distinct general categories, emphasizing the equality of experiences. Narrative reasoning, on the other hand, “functions by analogy, moving from story to story rather than from specific to general. New stories are seen as similar, but not identical to previous ones, thereby causing us to reflect on the

nuances of the situation” (Rossing & Glowacki-Dudka, 2001, p. 733). Local memory websites containing memories in the form of stories with comments often also containing stories, offer us the methodological space for a narrative approach that takes the narrative reasoning of the locals as central as opposed to the nomological concepts of the researcher.

Regarding the memories on local memory websites as important resources with respect to empowerment also brings social network theory into consideration. Neal (2013) and Neal et al. (2011) study empowerment as relational following Christen’s (2012) addition of a relational component to psychological empowerment. In this approach each individual in a network is ascribed a network power that is derived from the occupation of a more or less “advantageous position within the pattern of personal relationships through which resources are exchanged” (Neal, 2013, p. 4). And in addition, the distribution of this network power across the members of a community gives an indication of the organization of the resources in that community. Extending this with insights from complexity theory leads Gilchrist to her theory of the well-connected community:

Social networks provide efficient parallel processing systems; receiving, relaying and interpreting information from a diversity of sources. In this way, the whole system or community is able to adjust its thinking and organizational forms to changing conditions. Community networks hold a repository of common sense, experiential knowledge and shared wisdom (often mediated by women). This provides a collective resource, but also makes an appearance through oppressive traditions and xenophobia. These can be damaging to individuals within that society but also prevent the community acquiring new insights or learning from experiences which challenge outdated assumptions. (Gilchrist, 2009, p. 266)

Following these lines of arguments in favor of a narrative approach including network analysis, it becomes desirable to thoroughly study an active local memory website and its community. What kind of connections do people discover there? What barriers of understanding do they penetrate? What connections are there between individual narratives? To what extent are common values and common beliefs developed? And at the same time, how do the answers to these questions relate to empowerment, especially across different levels?

While many narrative studies focus on “the notion of social and political transformation through *the telling* and *publishing* of stories, much less attention has been paid to the specifics of how such stories circulate, [and] are understood by individual viewers and listeners” (Matthews & Sunderland, 2013, p. 100). Matthews and Sunderland state that “[t]o our surprise, our search for other work that maps out ways of analyzing large-scale databases of life narratives did not produce a model for us to follow” (2013, p. 101). Consequently, methodology and models that can assist in the analysis the content and dynamics of large scale databases with memories or narratives are just starting to be explored. One of the explanations they offer is the complexity (big data sets) and ethical questions (loss of uniqueness) in re-contextualizing these personal narratives. In the examples they discuss there seem to be no cases where the comments on memories could be considered as data in which other community members value the content. This could offer what Snowden calls pre-hypothesis or abductive narrative research on narratives that have been indexed by the narrators themselves (Snowden, 2011).

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