

# TELLING OUR OWN STORY: The Role of Narrative in Racial Healing

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**AMERICA  
HEALING**®

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*Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us  
at the very moment it is being created.*

–Toni Morrison, 1993 Nobel Lecture<sup>1</sup>

## FOREWORD

The 21st Century has ushered in an era of unparalleled brain science and related research. We are learning how we use parts of our brains to create, store, and access not only information, but the meaning that information holds for us as individuals and the implications for our society. The power of narrative or story is emerging as an important piece of these discoveries. It seems that, as human beings, we are always telling ourselves and others “stories” about experiences and life itself. We use this warehouse of stories to organize and “categorize” our way through life. We literally call up “shared stories” to help us make decisions, make meaning, and navigate situations on a daily basis.

But the story of America at individual and collective levels is a story shaped by a dominant vestigial belief, a carryover from the 1700’s. From the Latin, *vestigium*, meaning footprint, footstep, track. The vestigial belief in human hierarchy, based on physical appearance or characteristics was first proposed by Linnaeus during the age of European Enlightenment. Like many ideas of that era, this concept of human hierarchy or racism, has transported human enterprise to unanticipated heights and depths. This idea was used to justify and rationalize the single most dramatic economic expansion in human history, the institution of trans-Atlantic slavery, and to support conquering, exploiting, displacing, and discriminating against entire populations within geographic areas.

The now mythic American story of rugged individualism and self-determination has morphed into values that are deeply held. Unfortunately for our country’s future and for millions of children of color those values are grounded in a skewed or incomplete story of the making of America. The interdependent and confluent lives of diverse people could have shaped an American ethos and value system that embodies empathy and understanding, a more balanced interpretation of rights, opportunity and privilege. But because dominant American values largely emerged from a flawed ideology of assumed superiority and inferiority of human worth, these deeply held mythologies continue to serve as barriers to cooperative and collective action on behalf of vulnerable children and the future viability of our nation.

*Telling Our Own Story: The Role of Narrative in Racial Healing* provides an important resource for leaders and practitioners working to overcome our nation’s legacy of racism. The authors present the emerging science of the power of narrative and do so within the context of efforts by diverse communities to

find effective ways of communicating and creating new, authentic stories that honor the complexity of the past while forging a more equitable future. Advocates, researchers, and leaders across multiple domains are urged to integrate this emerging science about the catalytic role that narrative, individual story, can play in meaningful change strategies. We are also advised to recognize that talking is a form of “action,” a precursor to decisions and collaborative efforts needed. We would be wise to remember that trust is a necessary foundation for shared action, and trust is anchored through experiences of gaining deeper understanding.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ii	Foreword
1	Introduction
4	SECTION I: THE NEUROSCIENCE OF UNDERSTANDING NARRATIVE
7	A. The Neurobiology of Narrative
7	B. The Function of Narrative
9	C. The Healing Potential of Narrative
11	SECTION II: HOW NARRATIVE CAN SERVE SOCIO-POLITICAL PURPOSES
13	A. New Narrative, New Behavior, New Outcomes
16	B. Understanding the Power of Media Narratives in Framing Racial Narratives
20	SECTION III: THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN RACIAL HEALING
24	Conclusion
25	References

## INTRODUCTION

This country has a series of meaning-making narratives that create enormous challenges for identity formation, community empowerment work, and equity advocacy.

Versions of the Horatio Alger story in which a poor lad lifts himself from poverty to affluence by his bootstraps underlies the classic American individualist narrative, our conceptions of success and failure, as well as the normative baseline for critiques of public policy aimed at redistributive justice and a social safety net. The “melting pot” narrative dictates that cultural identities should be subsumed under the “American” identity—and thus suggests that any ethnic group that seeks to maintain the integrity of its language or cultural traditions is somehow “un-American.” The metaphor of the “melting pot” also has a cruelly ironic twist for the descendants of the initial inhabitants of the land which now constitutes the United States. The still-celebrated Columbus discovery story flattens the many different Tribes and peoples into a single category and renders invisible the rich history of indigenous communities (Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown & Formsma, 2006). The “color-blind” narrative tells us that race shouldn’t matter (Bell, 2011). And if race doesn’t matter, then policies seeking to address racial inequities, people who identify race as salient, and any racial group’s desire to retain a distinct racial identity are “racists” or “playing the race card” (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis & Embrick, 2004).

Dominant narratives also pose obstacles for any who seek to move beyond the prescribed roles or characters they are supposed to play, dictating how each of us is seen. Codified through repetition, stereotypes solidify a narrative perpetuated by the media into our culture and ultimately, through schemas, into our unconscious. These stereotypes then become the lens through which individuals are viewed and treated. A Black man is too often “seen” as potentially dangerous or presumed to be an athlete or entertainer rather than a doctor, lawyer, teacher, or father. An Asian-American woman is “seen” as deferential, and an Asian-American man as skilled in math, but socially awkward. In our current political climate, many who appear Latino or of Middle-Eastern descent are presumed to be non-citizens: the ultimate exclusion. And outside of historical caricatures, Native Americans are often not seen at all (Cross, 2013)

**IN EVERY CULTURE AND EVERY RELIGION, STORIES HAVE PLAYED CRITICAL ROLES IN CONSTITUTING MEANING, CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY, AND PRESCRIBING BEHAVIOR.**

We can challenge the dominant narratives—and we do. We are all storytellers. As children, we are told stories about our families which become central to our sense of self. Our caregivers share folktales or fairytales from their own childhoods as a way to entertain but also to instruct. Children then begin to tell stories—about their families, themselves, their adventures, their dreams. Even before they can talk, toddlers imitate adults’ body language and enact stories through play. These stories we share become the form through which we view our lives and our identities. Our memories are constituted by the stories we tell (Pratt & Feise, 2004).

It has always been so. Before humans were able to share information with written symbols, storytellers acted as storehouses of history. In every culture and every religion, stories have played critical roles in constituting meaning, constructing identity, and prescribing behavior. Through memorable characters and compelling events, stories stir our emotions (Chwe, 2001). We internalize the shared standards and norms of our community through our desire to emulate the heroes and dissociate ourselves with the villains. (Chwe, 2001).

Storytellers teach. We learn through listening to stories and our knowledge is largely constructed from the stories we hear (Schank & Berman, 2002). Storytelling, for Indian families, is the “greatest teaching resource for communicating identity, values, and life skills,” (Cross, 2013, p. 3). Stories allow us to teach and learn in formal and informal settings. As Cross describes, “The Indian family is supported intellectually by ‘self talk’ and by the stories we hear about how others have managed. Sitting around the kitchen table or on the front steps, we learn strategies for interacting with the world or how to use resources” (2013, p. 3).

Stories or, more formally, narratives involve a distinct way of thinking which humans use to complement the “paradigmatic” mode of thinking which involves creating categories (schema) into which we store and organize the overwhelming stimuli we experience (Bruner, 1986). The narrative mode treats experiences as unique historical events containing plots (intentions, actions, and outcomes) which allow us to understand and interpret human activity and behavior (McAdams, 2001). Our experiences hearing and telling stories create the capacity for us to

engage in perspective taking, empathy, critical thinking, and nuanced ways of understanding the world (Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph & Smith, 1992).

Humans have an enormous appetite for learning about the world around them. Yet our appetites are far greater for creative stories than for dry recitations of facts or densely written academic articles. Unlike a text book, which we force ourselves to read out of obligation, stories compel our attention for hours on end (Boyd, 2009). American children read stories in bed with flashlights, teenagers share gossip around their lockers, and adults organize their lives to catch their “stories” on television. Interest in stories and story-telling is a global phenomenon; we seek to explain the world to each other through narrative, whether we describe the stars as burning balls of gas, like Western scientists, or slivers of light dropped by Raven when the world was dark, like the Haida people of British Columbia (Mehl-Madrona, 2007). Each story has a point we wish to convey, leading us to adapt our narratives to fit a particular audience (Boyd, 2009). Because our brains respond so powerfully to information in the form of narratives, those of us engaged in equity work or community empowerment ignore this form of communication at our peril.

Stories are crucial not only because they engage our attention, but because of their role in creating meaning. They orient us to what we perceive to be true, possible, and ideal. Stories are central to the development of our world view and the values we hold sacred (Westen, 2011). Because they are integral to structuring how we interpret events and facts, stories have been described as the “third dimension” of power (Gaventa, 1980). And, like other forms of power, stories become subtle vehicles for the dominant class to construct and prescribe roles that lead to status differentiation. “Stock” stories lock us into caricatured roles and circumscribe our humanity (Bell, 2011). Stock stories have always met resistance—and now our increased understanding of cognitive neuroscience will help us understand how best to contest the dominant narratives of our time.

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## SECTION I: THE NEUROSCIENCE OF UNDERSTANDING NARRATIVE

Modern technology allows us to witness how our brain responds to situational cues and identify behavior-rewarding hormones and has confirmed that our brains are more than a static collection of anatomical parts. Their *neuroplasticity*, or ability to adapt physically to changes in our environment, renders them fluid organisms shaped by an amalgamation of narratives; memories of our childhood, stories we have read, and lessons learned in school all influence our perception of the world. Sometimes we are the characters in the narratives shaping our cognitive perceptions; sometimes we merely adapt and infer from someone else's narrative. As one neuroscientist put it, the brain is "a social organ built through experiences," (Cozolino, 2006, p. 7). Current research on neural functioning has consistently demonstrated the brain's superior ability to infer themes from spoken or written narratives, and that our anatomy is designed to enable empathy for real or imagined characters. Put simply, our brain serves a social purpose, connecting us as creatures in a larger community through interwoven stories.

Knowing how the brain works is critical to understanding how narratives operate and influence our behavior. Most of our actions occur without our conscious awareness, triggered by stories we tell ourselves repeatedly over time. We experience the world as a complex set of visual cues, noises and symbols; as children, we learn from the people around us what to make of these experiences. From our schoolteacher, we might learn that a skinny, fuzzy straw is a useful tool for stringing beads and creating art projects; the same object, however, takes on a different meaning with our grandfather, who uses it to clean his pipe. The narratives we are told help create and reinforce the ways in which we interpret the world. In turn, the narratives we learn must necessarily come from the storytellers around us. As children and adults, we derive meaning from novel sensory experiences by seeking out others who have experienced the same thing. Hearing a scary noise at night as a child, we may have sought out an older adult's opinion about the "monster" under our bed. Their reassurance that the sound was only a branch tapping on the window outside helped us redefine the narrative to be less scary. As we get older, we can recall the story of the branch on the window pane on our own, now able to interpret the sound for ourselves. We rely less on others, using their previous narratives much later even in the absence of their presence.

While we are not born knowing the uses or meanings of the stimuli around us, our brains also do not need an interpreter by our side, constantly creating context for that stimuli. Rather, over time, our brains create categorical shortcuts (or schemas, to use the scientific phrase) for most of the sights we see and sounds we hear (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). This process is referred to as 'implicit social cognition.' We may initially define an object by a specific story, over time, as we tell ourselves the narrative repeatedly, a neural shortcut begins to form (Kahneman, 2003; Tversky & Kahneman, 1983). Studying how group members differentially interpret and negotiate their understandings of the same task, Moscovici (1973) noted social representation, or the culturally-understood story given to everyday objects, serves two purposes. He concluded that it allowed individuals "to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it," while secondly, it provided members with "a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the... world and their individual and group history," (p. 93). Implicit social cognition, through which one's earlier lived narratives are unknowingly influencing the outcome of current behavior, may help create continuity in the social representation of the world. Using the language learned previously, we can relay stories and share our experiences with each other.

Being able to identify and categorize situations or objects subconsciously and immediately was evolutionarily critical to our ancestors' survival and is similarly necessary to us. In some contexts, however, it proves deeply problematic. Our "quick and dirty" processing pathway, referred to as the Fight-or-Flight response, has formed to help us react at a moment's notice. Originally designed to help

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us flee a predator or sniff out edible berries, the acute stress response activates instantaneously and subconsciously to cues from our environment. A rustling in the bushes, for example, filled our ancestors with dread and quickened their heart beat. They would likely feel a rush of adrenaline and sudden desire to run, imagining a bear or other dangerous creature hiding in the bushes.

In modern America, rarely do we need fear encountering a dangerous predator. As a result, our fight-or-flight response can be more of a hindrance than a help. Our implicit social cognitions extend to categories for other people as well as objects, with judgments occurring subconsciously and instantaneously. Based upon visual and aural cues, we make automatic assumptions about what category a particular person fits within, and how we should respond to them. These categories and judgments continue to serve us well in many instances – cuing us to offer some people a seat when we identify them as an elder, for example. When our categories are freighted with negative associations, however, we can often misjudge and activate the acute stress response unnecessarily. In these instances, errors can be life-threatening—a police officer misinterpreting the object in a man’s hand as a cell phone and not a gun, for example.

Following evolutionary necessity, which required humans to pay greater attention to any category that may be a predator, categories continue to influence what people pay attention to, how they organize their attention, and what they later remember (Whitley & Kite, 2010; Hamilton, 1981). These life-threatening errors have a tendency to occur more in some situations than others. In other words, categorization can activate stereotypes that hamper rather than help our assessment of how to behave or respond in a given situation (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Kahneman, 2003). The widespread stereotype of Black criminality makes it more likely that a cell phone will appear to be a gun if the person holding it is Black rather than White (Hamilton & Sherman, 1994).

Research by Higgins, Roney, Crowe and Hymes (1994) underscores the role of schemas in creating and perpetuating negative social bias. The researchers successfully manipulated whether participants would engage in approach or avoidance strategies towards another person by changing the narrative framing their definition of “friendship.” Higgins et al. (1994) demonstrated how different schemas around the same word can lead us to behave differently; in short, their findings suggest our narratives matter. The cognitive heuristics causing us to judge quickly whether to approach or avoid someone also extends to stereotyping; Kahneman (2003) documented several experiments in which researchers found participants repeatedly employed implicit biases in forming opinions about a hypothetical character. When participants had stereotypes about how a feminist activist usually behaves, for example, they were much more likely to indicate the character was a feminist banker if she had gone to an antinuclear arms rally, even though the probability of being both a banker AND a feminist

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was much lower than just being a banker. Stereotypes serve as one example of a maladaptive schema, pervading our implicit social cognitions and subconsciously affecting our behavior.

Narratives encompass the broader schemas and implicit theories that organize our responses to the world. They impact how we view the world and make meaning from sensory perceptions. The ways in which socialization helps us understand behavior in turn influences the schemas for how we interpret ambiguous stimuli. The stories on repeat in our minds interact with our biology, making us more or less likely to approach a situation. The narrative we build has the potential to negate or perpetuate social biases.

### A. The Neurobiology of Narrative

Using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRIs) and Positron Emission Tomography (PET) machines, modern scientists have successfully isolated and identified areas of the brain which respond to events in our surroundings. Researchers can take pictures of participants' brains and compare what sections "light up" when completing various activities. Given scanning techniques have only developed in the last few decades and remain extremely expensive to implement, little research has directly identified cognitive regions related to narrative understanding. Cobbling together studies from across many disciplines into one of the few reviews on the neuroscience of narrative, Mar (2004) speculates about areas potentially associated with story-making. He notes the role of our frontal lobe in processing information and language, as well as the activation of the right hemisphere when participants were asked to make inferences from a given set of sentences. Other researchers have similarly demonstrated the importance of this region in sense-making, describing patients who suffered from right-hemisphere strokes as able to articulate sentences and complete tests but suffering from language comprehension impairment (Beeman & Chiarello, 1998). Although research on the neuroscience of story-telling and comprehension remains relatively sparse, initial findings suggest certain hardwired circuits were designed specifically to process social narratives.

### B. The Function of Narrative

If we can reliably say areas facilitating narrative comprehension exist in our brains, the question becomes why did they evolve? What function do these centers serve? And how can we use the narrative centers to aid in our quest for racial healing? Comparing narrative story-telling to other methods of information transmission may help illuminate possible answers.

Because we rely on past experiences and learned lessons to inform our future decisions, narratives may have arisen as a mental shortcut for comprehending another person's experience. Baretta, Tomitch, MacNair, Lim and Waldie (2009) found narrative stories required less semantic processing than

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reading strict facts about an issue, suggesting individuals expend less mental energy to comprehend a story than to infer strict information devoid of context. Narratives implicitly create a “situation model,” where readers can tap into the microworld of its characters and relate to their experiences (Boyd, 2009). Expositions simply relate facts, while narratives transmit themes through a series of events. They build on shared cultural knowledge (Graesser, Olde, & Klettke, 2002), requiring listeners or readers to import background information to understand references (Baretta et al., 2009). Narrative becomes a faster vehicle for transmitting information since individuals need not spend time or mental energy constructing a setting for its goals; its characters, events, or stage may be familiar to its audience. Freed from having to situate the information in a relatable venue, individuals can more quickly infer meaning from narratives than from a series of unrelated facts. Specialized centers for processing narrative information, like the right hemisphere or the frontal lobe, may have developed to help expedite sense-making and reduce mental load.

The ability to infer information more quickly serves a social function, as narratives transmit messages about certain behavior’s acceptability as well as encouraging altruism. The areas associated with narrative comprehension develop separately from the speech production centers in the brain (Awad, Warren, Scott, Turkheimer & Wise, 2007), supporting the idea that we may be able to understand narratives well before we can talk. Our responses to narrative stimuli may be hardwired from an early age. Developed before age two, certain neurons in the human brain allow us to recognize the difference between biological and non-biological movement; newborn babies will imitate another human within hours of birth, and children frequently reenact modeled play (Boyd, 2009). We may gain the ability to comprehend stories well before we can perpetuate them verbally. Furthermore, research suggests the process of envisioning a recounted narrative arises innately, neither specific to a given culture nor developmentally learned (Boyd, 2009). Across populations, children demonstrate a similar ability early on to comprehend the narrative around them and adjust their behavior accordingly. Children as young as a year old, still lacking language production capabilities, have been shown to recognize and respond to distress in adults (Boyd, 2009). Although not necessarily vocalized, narratives can help create interpersonal empathy from an early age.

In addition to creating social affinity, the ability to understand narratives may serve as a heuristic for figuring out acceptable or unacceptable social behavior (Boyd, 2009). We tell our children stories about *The Little Engine That Could* to encourage them to keep trying in the face of adversity, or about our own positive experiences at the dentist to help them feel less afraid. Before they can write or even formally verbalize their own stories, children often partake in narrative play (Boyd, 2009); their interactions may not follow a logical pattern, but they nevertheless engage in peer communication about acceptable acts. Whether real-world

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tales or fictional accounts, our narratives transmit ideas and messages to our audience; we tell them with a purpose of achieving a goal. The ability to deduce this goal rapidly allows us to communicate more smoothly and increases potential emotional affinity.

### C. The Healing Potential of Narrative

With an early predisposition towards narrative comprehension, we may benefit from transforming our dialogues around community well-being into empathy-generating stories. Mehl-Madrona (2007) has argued for a similar metamorphism in healthcare, asserting conventional medicine fails to consider an individual's social context. His comparisons for healing in the physical domain may help inform suggestions for racial healing. Like Western medicine, all too often we look for a simple cause-and-effect relationship between two variables. This "linear" worldview stands in contrast with the multi-dimensional "relational" or "cyclical" world view rooted in tribal cultures (Cross, 2013). Rather than a mechanistic explanation, we need to evaluate how the system of variables contributes to outcomes in stigmatized communities. Racist behavior and attitudes stem from a larger flawed context encouraging and even rewarding discrimination. Practices such as Indian child removal by the child welfare systems result from a set of long-entrenched, institutionalized norms (Blackstock, Cross, George, Brown & Formsma, 2006). Any feasible solutions for healing need to have a community and systems focus, recognizing that "curing" a single individual cannot eradicate the conditions.

While only recently has Western science explored the implications of narrative form on well-being, Native American tribal elders across several cultures have long linked health with four simple questions. They believed to understand problems with one's well-being we must first ask the unwell individual: Who are you? Where did you come from? Why are you here? Where are you going? (Mehl-Madrona, 2006) On an individual level, tribal elders believe our health is linked to the story surrounding our lives. While this approach to disease may at first seem inconsistent with conventional Western medicine, doctors diagnosing a patient with suspected diabetes or heart disease would ask similar questions: Has this happened to you before? Is there a history of this condition in your family? What specifically brought you in today? What sort of lifestyle do you envision for yourself in the future? The answers to these questions—whether asked by a Johns Hopkins medical student or a tribal healer—would fundamentally help paint the picture of disease and potential healing solutions. Doctors may even tell narratives about themselves, creating a story in which they swoop in as the hero at the last minute to save a dying patient.

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When considering the role of narrative, we must remember that the brain weaves together the stories we have been told since our youth; how we interpret our problems or pain today stems in large part from the lessons we have seen play out before. We cannot separate the problems and pain in our community now from where we have been, where we want to go, or what we feel. Our brains exist as data processing centers, responding in real time to the stories around us.

## SECTION II: HOW NARRATIVE CAN SERVE SOCIO-POLITICAL PURPOSES

While the conventional stories of our history and our social roles provide a powerful gravitational pull, storytelling has always played a significant part in challenging the status quo. The ability to imagine a world that is different than the present is the beginning of any movement for change: to be able to communicate the world one imagines to others and have it feel possible is the power of narrative.

What made Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington so powerful? Why is it still taught today? He envisioned a new reality that reflects our current ideal:

*I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by their character.*

The speech, of course, included much more than that single image. Indeed, the stanza that follows it includes the more complex critique of states' rights as represented by George Wallace:

*I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; that one day right down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.*

Why do we still remember, teach, and celebrate Rosa Parks and Cesar Chavez among the countless women and men who worked for social justice during the 1950s and 1960s? Because each was a highly memorable character—Rosa Parks, a seamstress who quietly refused to give up her seat, Cesar Chavez, the image of a charismatic leader and hero (Boyd, 2009). Accurate histories of the Civil Rights Movement appropriately emphasize that the Montgomery Bus Boycott did not arise as the result of the spontaneous courage of an individual but was rather an organized effort of many people to bring attention to the injustices all were experiencing. Nevertheless, the narrative of Rosa Parks jumps to the forefront of our minds when we consider the movement; admiring her courage and relating to her humanity, we grasp more easily the symbolic story than the expository facts surrounding it. Similarly, the United Farm Workers consisted of many people other than Cesar Chavez (indeed, he co-founded its predecessor organization the National Farm Workers Association with Dolores Huerta, among others). But the

story of Rosa Parks and the image of Cesar Chavez capture our attention and remain in our memory.

While we remember and celebrate these now iconic individuals, each was part of a movement. And their stories, along with many others, suggest that social groups can use narratives to challenge power and seek change. Those involved in the Civil Rights and Farm Worker movements recognized and effectively used techniques leading to the creation of empowering collective or group identities (Jacobs, 2002, Steinmetz, 1992). They identified that a social narrative requires a plot, the process of transforming events into a coherent and compelling story in which the actions involved lead a listener or reader to identify with the goals of the social group (Jacobs, 2002).

Closely related to the plot is the identification of characters—protagonists and antagonists—who serve as “embodiments of society’s deep cultural codes” (Jacobs, 2009). The Civil Rights Movement carefully identified antagonists such as Bull Connor and George Wallace who would vividly embody violations of the post-World War II ethos. Similarly, the Farm Workers recognized the need for the country to see their struggle as not just a labor issue, but a battle for human dignity and justice. It became a “David v. Goliath” battle and captured the public imagination in a way that earlier efforts had not (Ferriss & Sandoval, 2010).

Narratives’ strategic usage through history has demonstrated the importance of choosing a compelling protagonist. Would-be proponents of social change need a hero or heroine they can easily identify with. Boyd (2009) emphasizes the need to captivate one’s audience; if the story recipients do not view the characters as important or relatable, they quickly lose interest. With so many narratives in the world to pick from, the one we form must hold our audiences’ attention. “Choosing” a protagonist who is a real person and not a fictional creation is complex—and can be politically and morally fraught. History has all but forgotten Claudette Colvin, a young Black woman who refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus and who was arrested in early March, 1955. At only 15 years old, Claudette was poised to become an important standard bearer for the movement; E.D. Nixon, the then-president of the Montgomery Chapter of the NAACP, encouraged the head of the NAACP’s youth group to reach out to Claudette and encourage her to speak out. Rosa Parks was then the NAACP’s youth group leader and secretary for the NAACP; before she refused to give up her own seat on the bus, Rosa Parks fought to promote Claudette Colvin as the rallying figure in desegregation (Hoose, 2009). At the encouragement of the NAACP, Claudette filed a lawsuit alleging the unconstitutionality of Montgomery’s bus system. Raising financial and political support from her community, Claudette seemed poised to help end desegregation.

In the end, however, the movement was presented with a difficult choice. Acutely aware of the power of narratives and stereotypes, the choice of Claudette Colvin as the protagonist was complicated when she became pregnant by a married man (Barnes, 2009). Leaders were deeply concerned that her condition

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would imperil her likelihood of gaining adherents and galvanizing support for the nascent movement. Ultimately, the NAACP encouraged Claudette to retract her lawsuit and waited for a more unambiguous heroine to come along. Rosa Parks, a mature, well-respected citizen in the Montgomery community (Hoose, 2009), who refused to give up her seat in December, 1955, was ideal.

Our ultimate goal is to challenge the notion that one must be “perfect” for the broader society to consider us worthy of fair treatment. Claudette Colvin was no less a victim than Rosa Parks or the many others forced to stand in the back of the bus. But when we are using narratives in service of social movements, we need be aware that our primary characters – our heroes and our villains—will be under intense scrutiny. And our choices will matter.

### A. New Narrative, New Behavior, New Outcomes

Constituting powerful communication tools that articulate the meaning behind our experiences, past narratives and our internal schemas may seem insurmountable predictions of the stories to come. Our histories combine with the tales we imagine for our future to form our *narrative identity*, most strongly constructed in adolescence (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The story we tell about ourselves can strongly shape how we behave. Recent work intervening at the self-concept level suggests the hopeful possibility that, through reshaping our narratives, we can change our behavior and ultimately our outcomes.

While narratives can be used to reinforce stereotypes—and often stereotypes contain reinforcing narratives—we can employ narratives to successfully combat stereotypes. Narratives often transmit information about who belongs in our group and who deserves marginalization. Whether we realize it or not, we hold implicit schemas about how prejudice functions; we tell ourselves stories to rationalize laughing at a comedian’s sexist joke or explain why we judge a peer negatively for tipping minority waiters less. Our narratives around prejudice serve as an example of how differences in cognitive schemas influence behavioral outcomes. Carr, Dweck and Pauker (2012), wondering whether beliefs around prejudice affected differences in prejudiced behavior, found majority-group individuals’ beliefs caused behaviors above and beyond implicit or explicit amounts of prejudice. Individuals who believe the prejudice narrative was relatively fixed reported less desire to attend race- or diversity-related activities as well as decreased interest in interracial interactions. Teaching participants that prejudice is a malleable narrative, able to be altered and attenuated, led White participants to express comparatively less anxiety and react more positively in an interracial interaction. Their finding suggests “prejudice” behavior arises from one’s beliefs in the story structured around it, as well as the content of the beliefs themselves. In addition to hinting at possible ways to reduce racial tensions, work by Carr et al. (2012) demonstrates the flexibility of narrative and the ability of the human mind to absorb new stories benefiting intergroup relations.

Narratives can play a large role in perpetuating racial tensions. A pervasive society-wide narrative depicting one group as subordinate to another can result in the minority group’s marginalization. Furthermore, individuals in the marginalized group may be subject to frequent “identity threat” which occurs

when one's individual self-view is challenged (Sherman et al., 2013, p. 592). Identity threat can be a chronic stressor as individuals monitor their environments for signs of identity devaluation and experience anxiety about their belonging (Sherman et al., 2013). The societal narratives around them may force minority group members to stay extra vigilant, often fearful of fulfilling the narrative script prescribed by the majority. Stereotype threat—or the concern with being evaluated in terms of or confirming a stereotype about one's group—often manifests itself in anxiety and distraction (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The preoccupation with writing a life story true to one's narrative identity and separate from the stereotyped societal narrative creates a cognitive burden and often prevents feelings of belongingness (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Stereotype threat has negative, long-term consequences for the targeted individual. In an academic setting, this extra cognitive burden has been found to prevent students from performing to their potential years later, and deter them from educational opportunities (Sherman et al., 2013; Walton & Cohen, 2007; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, Crosby, 2008; Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002). Understanding how to change the narratives influencing students' self-schemas and one's narrative identity becomes even more important when we consider the educational disparity in our society between White and minority students.

To clarify, stereotype threat is not another name for the general stress many students feel when taking a test or performing in an important event. Rather, it is a result of negative stereotypes in particular domains—girls in math and science, Blacks and Latinos in educational contexts—and is a cognitive phenomenon that has been shown to systematically disadvantage members of the affected groups (Banner, Kang, & Godsil, 2012). (For an engaging summary of this research, see C.M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us* (Norton, 2010).) As mentioned earlier, cognitive heuristics designed to help determine predators from prey all too easily enable us to act on implicit schemas derived from stereotypes. In a society flooded with anti-minority narratives, young children may learn and internalize the biased content. Seeing Black actors portrayed as only athletes or criminals on television shows, young Black children may come to believe their narrative identity cannot include being a rocket scientist or an Art Deco sculptor. A single, stagnant narrative has negative consequences for the prospects of stereotyped individuals.

While narratives can trap people into a prescribed role or stereotype, recent research has also shown that this phenomenon can be challenged by counter-narratives (Sherman et al., 2013). These counter-narratives can take the form of “self-affirmations” that remind a person of “sources of personal integrity and meaning that are enduring, unconditional, even transcendent” (Sherman et al., 2013, p. 593; Burson, Crocker & Mischkowski, 2012). These self-affirmations can be reflections on core values and relationships and allow the person engaging in the self-affirmation to see what may otherwise be experienced as a threat in a larger context, which can diminish its psychological power (Sherman et al., 2013; Steele,

**IN A SOCIETY FLOODED WITH ANTI-MINORITY NARRATIVES, YOUNG CHILDREN MAY LEARN AND INTERNALIZE THE BIASED CONTENT.**

1988). These self-affirmations “help shore up a ‘narrative of adequacy,’” (Sherman et al., 2013, p. 594). The participant is forced to dwell upon the positive aspects of their narrative identity, rather than be allowed to focus on their captivity in the current storyline.

Changing the educational narrative to be more affirming has been found to be effective for members of threatened groups in academic settings, including both Black and Latino students attending mixed-race schools (Cohen et al., 2006; Sherman et al., 2013). In one field study involving Black and White students attending a mixed race middle school, researchers gave students a set of structured writing exercises continuing throughout the seventh grade (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen et al., 2009). The Black students who wrote an affirmative narrative described values important to them; they earned higher grades than the Black students in the control condition (Cohen et al., 2006), with the effects persisting in a follow-up study two years later (Cohen et al., 2009). White students showed no differences between the affirmation and control conditions (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen et al., 2009). While the lack of change in White students compared to the significant differences between Black participant groups may seem puzzling at first, it may serve as evidence of a successful manipulation. White students traditionally are not stereotyped as academically delinquent, instead they are believed to be successful and headed for college. Whether White students wrote a self-affirmation or not would not have changed their narrative story. In either case, their implicit social cognition did not indicate any cause for alarm or belief they would not pass their courses. Contrastingly, the difference we see among Black participants may stem from a shift in narrative beliefs in the self-affirmation condition. Black subjects in the control condition had no change in their stereotyped narrative. Concern over society’s belief in them as destined for jail or self-destruction may not have been explicitly activated, but most likely influenced their implicit social cognition of how people expected them to perform. Subjects in the self-affirmation condition, however, were asked up front to restructure their narrative and focus on the reasons why they could succeed; it is not surprising then, that in the three conditions where the stereotyped narrative remained the same, there appeared no difference in results. In contrast, when Cohen et al. (2006; 2009) changed the stereotyped narrative, Black participants’ academic performance improved and stayed elevated for at least a year afterwards.

Similar effects were found in a recent study involving Latino students also attending mixed-race middle schools (Sherman et al., 2013). Latino seventh graders who engaged in narrative transformation through an affirmation intervention had higher grades than Latino students in the control condition, with effects persisting for three years (Sherman et al., 2013). While this study took place in a mostly middle-class neighborhood school, 90% of the Latino students received free or reduced lunch and 58% were enrolled in a English-as-a-second-language course (Sherman et al., 2013). The Latino students in the control condition experienced a negative trajectory in grades over the school year which was deflected in the affirmation condition (Sherman et al., 2013).

Identity threat can also affect the narratives students experience in school settings, leading to an expectation that they will experience stereotyping and

identity-based negative treatment (Sherman et al., 2013). This narrative often translates into a state of acute vigilance, in which students monitor their environment for cues to determine potential identity threat, becoming a constant burden detracting from attention to their schoolwork (Cohen & Garcia, 2008). The narratives of stereotypes can also result in students construing everyday hardships experienced by all races and ethnicities—negative feedback from a teacher or peer rejections—as confirmation of identity devaluation (Sherman et al., 2013). When students experience school with identity threat engaged, they often experience lower academic motivation (Sherman et al., 2013).

Self-affirmation has proved valuable in addressing these forms of identity threat as well (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). In a second study of Latino middle school students, researchers found that self-affirmation allowed Latino students to weather the “day-to-day slings and arrows of academic experience” without losing academic motivation or interpreting daily adversity as a result of identity threat (Sherman et al., 2013, p. 608). And even when perceiving identity threat, affirmed students did not experience a decrease in academic motivation (Sherman et al., 2013). Changing the narratives altered the experiences of racial threat and had real consequences on students’ academic performance.

## **B. Understanding the Power of Media Narratives in Framing Racial Narratives**

The American political right has developed an array of effective narratives to undercut arguments for racial justice. Some of the most common and most effective strategies include citing the individual responsibility of people to fight racism as well as the notion that those pursuing racial justice are simply “playing the race card.” We have a sense that these narratives are effective in shaping the public’s reaction to incidents such as the Skip Gates arrest or the Trayvon Martin shooting, but little research has been done expressly to study the impact of these narratives on perceptions of a racially-charged incident. The American Values Institute (AVI) Racial Narratives Project was created to study the following question: if members of the public are exposed to different types of narratives, do their opinions shift or are they firmly cemented upon hearing about the incident?

The AVI Racial Narratives project (Baretto, Godsil, & Gonzales, in press) tested the effects of three different narratives on public reactions to an incident modeled on a cross between the all-too-common police harassment experienced by young men of color and the Skip Gates arrest. In one iteration of the study, individuals who participated in the online study were shown a short fictional video in which a young Black man was arrested while trying to get into his car. The young man initially reacts with surprise and tries to explain that he accidentally locked his keys in the car. He offers to present identification but when he reaches for his wallet, the police officer aggressively tells him to put his hands on the car and arrests him. After watching the incident video, participants saw a short piece of footage ostensibly from a local news station. This footage featured a brief introduction and one of three commentaries pertaining to the arrest: 1) a conservative commentary rooted in the individual fault and “race card” narrative; 2) a traditional liberal narrative focusing on racial injustice; and finally 3) an empathic

liberal narrative humanizing both the police officer and the victim. We also tested whether the race of the commentator altered the efficacy of the narrative, with half of the participants in each of the three conditions watching either a White or a Black commentator talk.

Subjects then answered several questions about the incident video, including: 1) Was the officer just in doing his job and reacting properly? 2) Did the individual have the right to be upset at the situation? 3) Would the individual have been arrested if he was White? 4) Was the arrestee disrespectful and get what he deserved? Overall, approximately 69 percent of participants did not feel that the officer was just in doing his job and reacting properly. Collapsing across all four questions, participants who were in the Black conservative condition were most likely to believe the police officer had acted justly.

Participants were also asked a set of four questions based on the commentary: 1) Do the police need more training in order to react properly to situations like the one seen in the video?; 2) Are people too quick to play the race card?; 3) Does racial profiling remain a serious problem in the United States?; 4) Are police just human beings who make mistakes like all of us? The effectiveness of the commentary was assessed based on the differences across conditions. Regardless of the race of the speaker, empathic liberal commentary resulted in more participants agreeing that the police needed better training across pundit commentators (82% and 81% endorsement in the Black and White commentator conditions respectively). Black conservative commentary once again had a large impact, with a difference of 19 percent separating those who received the Black conservative message from those who received the Black empathic commentary. Furthermore, the results emphasize a general trend suggesting narrative messages matter; in each of the three commentator conditions, participants responded just as equally to Black and White speakers. The medium, rather than the storyteller, mattered. It appears empathetic liberal commentary more strongly convinced participants of the need for better police training than conservative or traditional liberal pleas. The results are shown in the figure below.

**CONSERVATIVE COMMENTARY**

“The rule is you mess with the bull, you get the horns. When you are dealing with a police officer, you show them the respect they want. Otherwise, you can get arrested. Mr. Carson overreacted, used the race card and should apologize to the officer who was only responding to a citizen’s call for help.”

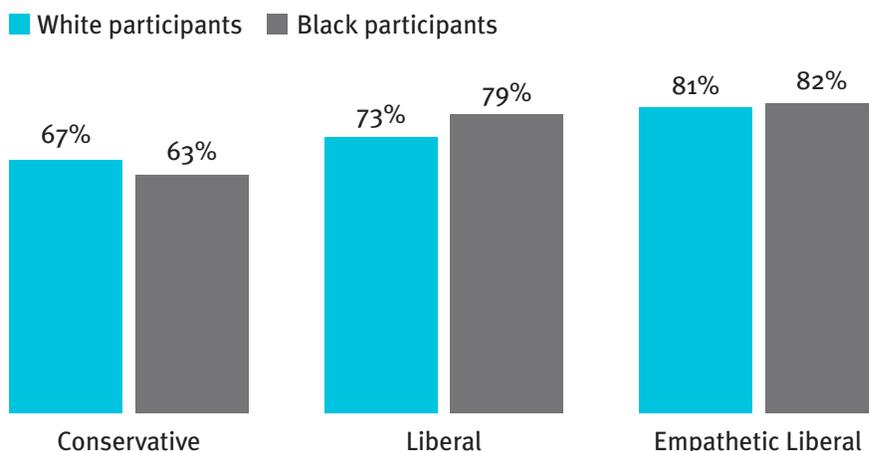
**LIBERAL COMMENTARY**

“Police officers and security guards bring with them all of the prejudices that they have and we have to be aware of this. When they have to make decisions these prejudices can influence how they react. Racial profiling remains a serious problem with law enforcement in the United States. The larger lesson here is that the police treat Blacks differently than they do Whites.”

**EMPATHETIC LIBERAL COMMENTARY**

“Police officers and security guards, like the rest of us, often have to make snap decisions. We are guided by our instincts in such instances, which are influenced by the prejudices we have, whether we know it or not. Police are just human beings after all. The larger lesson here is that they need to be trained a little bit differently in dealing with people who may be at their worst moment.”

FIGURE 1. AGREEMENT IN BELIEF THAT POLICE OFFICERS NEED BETTER TRAINING



Black conservative commentary had negative effects on two of the other questions. Participants exposed to the Black conservative condition reported the highest level of agreement that people were too quick to play the race card (82 percent) and lowest level of agreement that racial profiling remained a problem in the U.S. In contrast, participants receiving the White traditional liberal commentary had the lowest level of agreement that people were too quick to play the race card (63 percent) and the second highest level of agreement that racial profiling remained a problem (75 percent). For this question, participants in the Black liberal condition agreed slightly more (76 percent), but the difference between the two is not large enough to suggest that the race of the commentator is playing any role. Across conditions, empathic commentary led to higher levels of agreement than traditional liberal commentary.

These findings suggest that the type of narrative adopted can greatly influence interpretations of the exact same event. When delivered by same-race commentators on conservative stations, footage of a Black man being wrongly arrested is highly effective in validating existing racial biases or beliefs in America as a color-blind society. However, the success of the empathic liberal commentary also implies that narratives can have a positive impact on attitudes, particularly when it comes to humanizing police officers while also allowing for the fact that they may need more training for dealing with racially sensitive situations. Empathic liberal commentary has the capacity to shift emphasis away from the officer and towards solutions.

These findings further illustrate the efficacy of the conservative narrative when delivered by same-race pundits at validating notions of colorblindness and reinforcing implicit bias. With the increasing usage of same-race commentators by the right, those on the left need to find an effective way to challenge these narratives. The AVI Racial Narratives Project is also assessing the effects of political commentary and particular narratives upon response to a video showing a young Latino man being hassled and challenged to show proof of citizenship to a police officer. Our initial findings suggest similar findings to the study involving a young Black man, but with some variations.

To provide solutions for racial healing, we need further research on a narrative generating empathy and the desire to prevent future discrimination. Better understanding empathetic liberal commentary, which generated greater participant tolerance for all actors in the incident, could provide clues about how to discuss racially-charged incidents in a manner that breeds acceptance. While creating more understanding than conservative commentary, traditional liberal narratives focusing on the role of race are not as successful in shifting opinion when compared to a message focusing on the police officers' human fallibility and identifying a systemic need for greater training. The AVI Racial Narratives Project provides experimental evidence highlighting the importance of narrative framing as a medium for increasing or decreasing public support; the same incident,

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spun differently, can have variable effects on its audience. Reclaiming the racial narrative will require careful consideration of the story being told and further exploration into how dissemination in the media affects recipient empathy.

### SECTION III: THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN RACIAL HEALING

Narrative racial healing, as with narrative medicine, would aim to restore harmony and balance within the community. Mehl-Madrona (2007) suggests that a community out of balance loses its resiliency. Paraphrasing a North American Indian tribal belief, he asserts that “we stand in a certain central location in reference to all the relationships in our lives,” (p. 46). When one of these relationships becomes misguided or unbalanced, we become less able to think clearly and make decisions benefiting communal well-being; our road diverges from a path of forgiveness, compassion, and love. A core belief in Native American Indian healing, according to Mehl-Madrona (2007), stems from rediscovering the road to communal well-being. True balance arises when the needs of the spirit, body, context and mind have been equally met (Hodge, Limb, & Cross, 2009; Gowen, Bandurraga, Jivanjee, Cross, & Friesen, 2012). Applied within our communities, balanced healing might call for more focus on cultural rituals and family values, spirit, and context, while simultaneously emphasizing enough time for sleep (attention to the body) and remembrance of the past (paying homage to the mind). Recent research has begun developing accurate measures of resilience, perceived discrimination, spiritual involvement and community mindfulness, attempting to create a way to quantify holistic balance. Although the narrative of indigenous sickness differs from Western cause-and-effect biological prescriptions, it presents a compelling frame for understanding racial dissent in our communities.

Police treatment within communities of color, disproportionate discipline of young people of color, and the myriad racialized treatment still prevalent can be thought of as manifestations of sickness derived from our still toxic racial culture. Our challenge is both to change the dominant cultural narratives that trigger these behaviors and simultaneously to adopt internal narratives that strengthen resilience and openness to the capacity for change.

We need to bolster our communities' belief in change and agency. Zimbardo, Haney, Banks and Jaffe (1973), attempting to understand authority hierarchies, assigned a group of volunteer men to be either "prison guards" or "prisoners" and set up a mock prison in the bottom of a Stanford university building. Assuming their dominant position, the guards doled out physical punishment to "delinquent" subjects and deprived their peers of food, sleep and the ability to use the bathroom at will. All participants had been deemed mentally well before participating, having no preexisting conditions. Despite being volunteers who could leave at any moment, the "prisoners" became wholly invested in their roles; they succumbed to helplessness after the guards thwarted an initial escape plan, agreeing to scrub toilets with their bare hands as retribution (Zimbardo et al., 1973). While leaving the study remained a real possibility (no one was actually imprisoned), only two of the 24 participants did; the rest buckled to their assigned roles. The experiment became so real to participants, they became "stuck" in their own narrative; the ability to change the outcome of their story never crossed their minds. Only upon the horror and protestation of an uninvolved graduate student who happened to drop by the prison did the study finally stop; it took an outsider, disconnected from the narrative, to help free the participants from their trance. In the face of traumatic adversity, past science would suggest we have difficulties coming up with innovative solutions and become increasingly likely to surrender to futility.

Although narratives have the power to trap us in hopelessness, they may also be used as a vehicle to heal. We can reshape our ever-after ending by changing the tone of our story. Clinical psychologists have successfully used narrative medicine to treat a variety of mental health disorders, including traditionally hard to "cure" disorders like Bipolar Depression (Mehl-Madrona, 2007); their methods may offer clues about how to adapt narrative treatment to heal racial trauma. German psychologists found that among refugees previously diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), recreating and discussing patients' personal biographies led to a significant decrease in troubling symptoms (Hensel-Dittman et al., 2011). Furthermore, the effect grew over time, so that at a one-year follow-up the participants showed an even larger reduction in suffering as compared to six-months or prior to treatment. In contrast, patients who had merely discussed stress coping techniques with their therapist, but had not had the chance to reexamine the narrative of their lives, experienced less of a reduction in PTSD symptoms. Narrative Exposure Therapy, or repeatedly

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engaging with one's biographical trauma, may help individuals heal more effectively. Other forms of narrative therapy have gained traction within the clinical field, attempting to help individuals examine how their social relationships and stories about the self influence their well-being (McLeod, 2006). Rather than ignoring our narrative past, we may gain mental reprieve by facing prior trauma and find a way to rewrite our story.

Narrative healing will necessarily draw from many cultural contexts and will pose a powerful alternative to Western traditions. Attempting to tease apart disease from the context in which it originates, the Western tradition tends to compartmentalize and isolate each factor. The American system breaks apart an individual's well-being into separate, ostensibly unrelated, components; we go to a doctor if we are physically ill, a psychologist if mental anguish plagues us, or a religious figure if spiritually unwell. Alternative traditions recognize that our maladies do not fit so neatly into separate man-made categories. A serious falling out with one's siblings could lead to prolonged anxiety or depression; negative mental health in turn can trigger physical symptoms, like nausea and weight gain. The relationships in our lives affect how we feel and what we think. The reverse is also true: what we think influences how we feel and, in turn, our interactions within our community.

Because illness can manifest in response to numerous causes, the most successful healing follows careful consideration of all possible factors. Instead of the Western compartmentalized approach, Blackstone et al. (2006) promote the use of the Aboriginal Medicine Wheel, which examines health from a holistic perspective. Blackstone et al. (2006) warn that applying a Western mechanistic approach to a population unconvinced of the efficacy of the approach can prove ineffective. The linear paradigm used by Western healing often fails to consider spirituality, emotionality, physicality or cognitive functioning. A narrative approach to healing can incorporate a relational worldview that actively involves the context in which an individual is experiencing distress (Cross, Friesen, Jivanjee, Gowen, Bandurraga, Matthew & Maher, in press).

While narrative therapy has dealt primarily with individual healing, community-level applications are taking place (Cross, Friesen, Jivanjee, Gowen, Bandurraga, Matthew & Maher, in press). Community narratives are being re-conceived away from a "deficit" model in which the dominant narrative's conception of a particular community's inadequacies are accepted as true. Instead, community narratives can recognize their resilience in the face of oppression and their continued agency to define their future.

The narrative approach to healing is amenable to evaluation. One approach to determine the efficacy of alternative approaches to healing is "community-based participatory research" that has as its goal to empower community members – not outside researchers or policymakers – to tell their community's story and to

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articulate its needs (Cross et al, in press, p. 10). This form of research melds the rigor of standard research practices with the authenticity and agency of community organizing. It can form the basis for identifying “practice based evidence,” to “identify effective interventions, as well as areas for program or practice improvement and further support the efficacy of particular interventions,” (Cross et al, in press, p. 3).

## CONCLUSION

### He who defines reality, holds power.<sup>2</sup>

The stories we tell each other, the gossip we pass, and the media representation of events shape the meaning of our lives. To heal our communities, we must regain authorship of our own stories and tell the tales we conceive as our futures. In the words of Mehl-Madrona (2007), the power of narrative medicine stems from the “impossibility of separating treatment from the stories told about the treatment, the audience and the context in which the stories are told,” (p. 6). Treatment for racial disparities stems from the stories we tell each other. The context in which we frame our story is malleable, so why not choose a framing that encourages hope and instructs on how to begin healing? Mehl-Madrona (2007) concurs, “Healing rises or falls on the quality of the story, not the modalities chosen,” (p. 8). To begin healing from racial trauma, our story needs to consider the larger societal picture and reclaim authorship over the outcomes.

2 Terry Cross, 27th Annual “Protecting our Children” national conference Keynote Address

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